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The Duke of Albany's Own Highlanders



James Grant

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THE
DUKE OF ALBANY'S OWN
HIGHLANDERS

A NOVEL

BY
JAMES GRANT
AUTHOR OF THE 'ROMANCE OF WAR'

LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
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NEW YORK: 9 LAFAYETTE PLACE

1881

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To
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS, PRINCE LEOPOLD, K.G.,
ETC., ETC.,

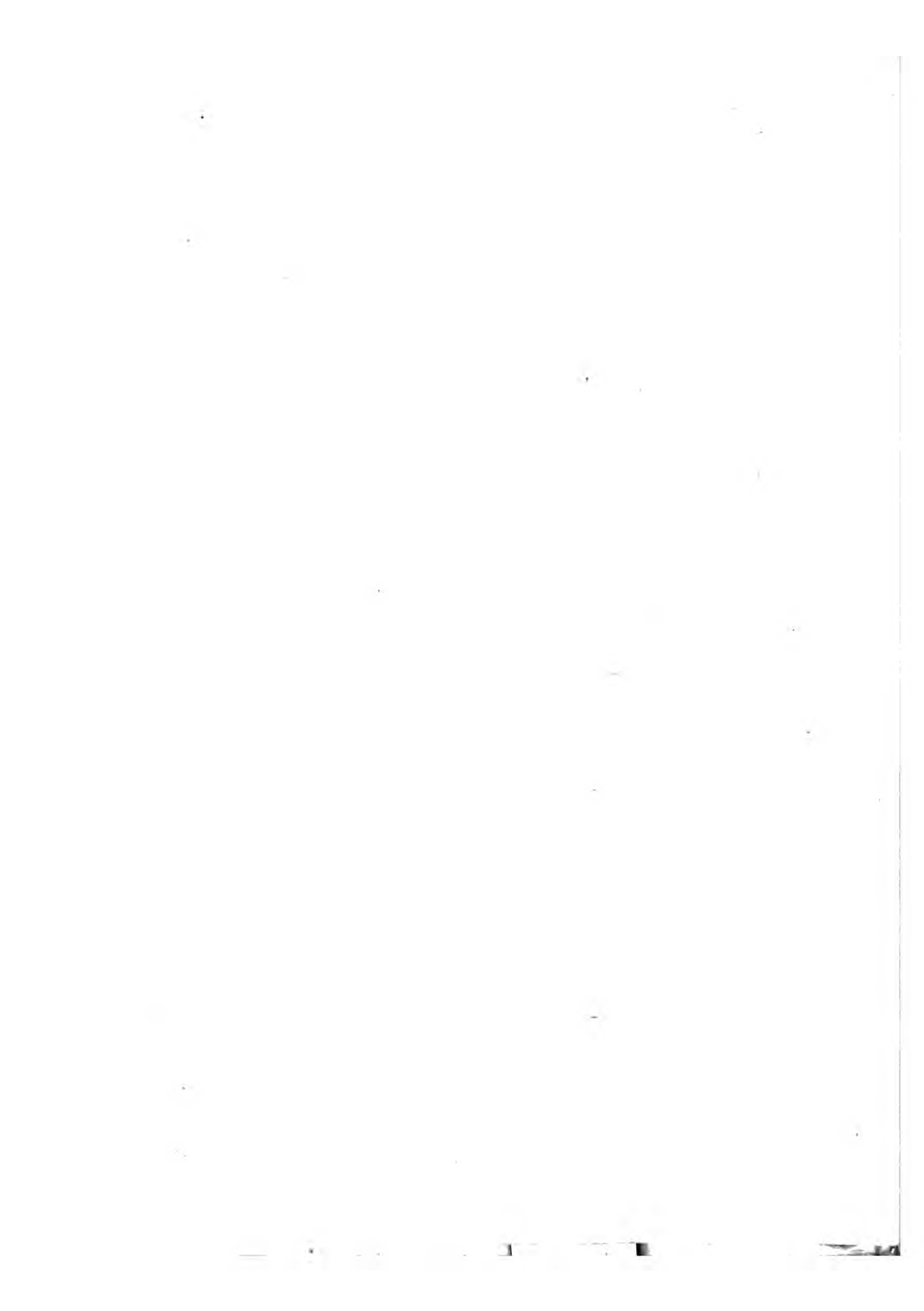
AS A PATRON OF LITERATURE,

THIS STORY,

'*THE DUKE OF ALBANY'S OWN HIGHLANDERS;*'

Is Most Respectfully Inscribed

BY PERMISSION.



P R E F A C E.



IF the following story of the Albany Highlanders (so called from the title of the second son of the King of Scotland) ends somewhat differently from novels usually, it is perhaps not the less true to the general chances of life, in which love—that element so necessary in Romance—does not always run so smoothly as a railway.

Such a catastrophe as that detailed as befalling the hero, actually occurred some years ago in the camp of the Ramghur Light In'antry in India.

The modern mode of recruiting in the Lowlands—a necessity consequent to the depopulation of the Highlands (where now more than two millions of acres are deer forest) and the new system of linked battalions—one so utterly destructive of *esprit de corps*—have changed the general tone of the Highland regiments, so clanship is almost forgotten in the ranks, and Gaelic unknown, or nearly so.

The Highland officer of the Peninsular days was different from what we find his representative now. I may mention that by a majority of votes, Gaelic was uniformly retained and spoken at the mess of the 2nd Battalion of the Gordon

Highlanders, till its reduction in Edinburgh Castle on the 24th October, 1814.

Thus, in many respects, the story of the Albany Highlanders will be found somewhat different in style and tenor from that of the Highlanders who figure in 'The Romance of War;' for our national corps, while inheriting the garb and the valour of their forefathers, have changed with the changing times.

25, TAVISTOCK ROAD, BAYSWATER,
April, 1880.

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THE DUKE OF ALBANY'S OWN HIGHLANDERS.



CHAPTER I.

TIME WILL SHOW.

‘PESHAWUR!’ said the girl, petulantly; ‘is it a gay place?’

‘I don’t know, but I should think not,’ replied the young man, smiling; it is all built of brick and mud, and the heat is so great that people generally live in their cellars to avoid it.’

‘And your unlucky regiment is there? Surely dull Stirling, with its mountain scenery and winding river, is preferable to such a place?’

‘Much—and more than ever to me.’

‘Why?’ asked the girl, archly.

Her question was rather a cruel one, and a home-one too, as we shall show ere long; yet her fine, clear eyes regarded the young man with perfect calmness—a calmness he, perhaps, was far from reciprocating.

‘Why?’ she repeated.

‘For many reasons—one more than all.’

‘And this reason?’ she persisted.

He sighed, and, after a pause, said, prosaically, yet tremulously:

‘Because my duty lies with our depôt.’

‘That is a necessity, not a preference,’ said she, playing with the tassel of her fan.

A secret, as yet untold—the secret that he loved her, and that she was all the world to him—trembled on the lips of Charlie ; yet, after a pause, he could only gulp down the rash emotion, and say, in a troubled voice :

‘ I am thankful, however, that rumour says after Peshawur, Cabul ; and after that, service in Central India.’

‘ Why?’ came the petulant query again.

‘ Because, truth to tell—and why should I be untruthful with you?—I could not live upon my pay, and unkind Fate has given me little more. Our chief—the colonel—would help me to a staff appointment, I know ; but why should I trouble you with my petty private affairs?’

A slight expression of reproach stole into her eyes, and both seemed to feel that their conversation had taken a peculiar turn, in which either too much or too little was said.

It occurred in one of the drawing-rooms of Abercairnie Castle on a bright summer afternoon, and the speakers were Lady Auriel Menteith, a young girl in the first bloom of her beauty, and Charlie Oliphant, a popular sub of the Albany Highlanders, the depôt of which lay in the fortress at Stirling, and who had succeeded in waltzing himself into high favour with the former.

Lady Auriel, so named from a remote ancestress, the sister of Mary, Countess of Menteith, the bride of Robert, Duke of Albany (for all the memories of her family were old indeed), was fair-skinned, with soft features, dark-blue eyes, and hair of a dusky golden hue, worn low over her brow ; her nose was nearly *retroussée*, and her mouth was fashioned in the perfect curve of the *arc de Cupidon*. There was nothing very patrician in her light and usually smiling features ; but the keenest critics of female beauty, always to be found among the ladies, failed to find any fault with the face of Auriel, save that it was very changeable in expression.

Thus, a kind of dreamy, almost sad one stole into her eyes when her pale countenance was in perfect repose ;

but more beautiful than ever did those eyes become when she was addressed—when her attention was roused, and her face became all animation ; but her figure was voted rather too *petite*.

The London season was not yet over, yet the Abercairnies were at Abercairnie for certain cogent reasons ; and Charlie Oliphant and his comrade, Daljarroch (yet to be introduced), were, to a certain extent, taking up some dropped links in the chain of the old, old story.

Did Lady Auriel know, or affect not to know, that from the moment Charlie Oliphant had set eyes upon her winsome face at a Queen's Assembly, in Edinburgh, during the past winter, he had coveted it with a pure passion, in which no mercenary intention found a place ? for Charlie, though poor, as he admitted himself to be (perhaps as an excuse for not saying *more*), was neither a tuft-hunter nor heiress-hunter ; and if either, certainly the Castle of Abercairnie was not the place to fly at such game.

The room in which they sat, though its fittings might be excelled by those of many another mansion in the county, by its aspect, might well dash the confidence of a penniless lover. It showed masterpieces of art in cabinets, lounges and enamels, and more than one exquisitely tender Greuze and striking Boucher peeping out between the rich hangings.

These surroundings caught, with due effect, the eye of Oliphant ; but to her, over whose chair he hung, they were, by habit, of no more account than the flowers in the garden beneath the windows, or the leaves in the forest vista that stretched away towards the river Teith. A *jardinière* filled with rare exotics stood in the deep recess of the centre window, and, on a pedestal of *rosso antico*, were Louis XV. and Madame de Pompadour dancing a minuet, worth many more guineas than Charlie ever possessed at once in his life.

The features of Charlie Oliphant were delicate, yet far from effeminate ; his figure was well developed by drill and manly exercise ; his eyes were dark and keen, yet gentle ; his lips

firm and fine, the short upper partially hidden by his moustache ; his face was dusky rather than sallow ; his hair short, curly, and crisp ; and every way he was the style of young fellow well calculated to please any girl's eye.

'I wonder you don't prefer the cavalry,' said Lady Auriel, after a pause ; 'you have seen my cousin Sidney in his hussar uniform, and is it not handsome ?'

This was every way an unlucky speech, for her cousin Sidney St. John, with all the facilities that cousinship afforded him, was the *bête noir* of Charlie's existence ; so he replied, almost coldly, yet smilingly :

'My fortune gives me no preference, Lady Auriel ; and, so far as costume is concerned, I think that the combination of the British uniform with the garb of old Gaul makes the most striking dress in the armies of Europe : thus, were I rich—even as Duncan Daljarroch—I would not change !'

'Have I offended you ?'

'Oh no, Lady Auriel !' he replied, in haste ; 'and, so far as pay is concerned, I should be in a worse case with the cavalry than even with the Highlanders.'

'True ! Sidney says that his pay barely pays for his gloves and cigars,' said she, laughing and toying with her fan.

'Sidney again !' thought he, and bit his nether lip.

'Do pardon my blundering speeches,' said she, looking upward at him shyly yet brightly, as she tapped his arm with her fan.

'The luck that often makes a haphazard speech more effective than a laboured oration' was, as a writer says, hers now ; but the haphazard speech remained unsaid, though it trembled on the tongue of Charlie, and his troubled gaze went down the long woody glen.

'How long those folk linger,' said she, observing him.

'I would you missed them as little as I do !' said he, with a pointed smile.

The Earl of Abercairnie, his English nephew the hussar, his eldest daughter Lady Augusta, and Captain Daljarroch,

had gone on a riding expedition towards Loch Veol and the Braes of Balquhiddy ; and Charlie, who had been detained on duty at Stirling till too late to accompany them, found himself, to his joy, left *tête-à-tête* with Lady Auriel, who, by a strange chance, had preferred to remain behind and work, for a bazaar, some trifles which she might have bought by the bushel in any Berlin-wool establishment ; but sooth to say, on this afternoon much progress had not been made with the trifles in question.

‘Will Duncan contrive to make *his* innings to-day?’ thought Charlie, aware that his wealthy comrade, Daljarroch, worshipped the ground that Lady Augusta trod on.

I do not know whether it was animal magnetism or some other equally subtle influence, but somehow, my Lord Abercairnie’s youngest daughter felt herself more at home with Charlie Oliphant than she had ever done with any of her male friends during the past season, or the part thereof she had spent in London ; and thus discovered herself saying things to him she would never have said to others, had she known them for fifty years.

With all her high *ton* and breeding, her general *abandon*, her frank and off-hand manner was varied by occasional fits of reserve and even hauteur ; yet all her moods were full of subtle attraction for him.

‘Do sing me something, Lady Auriel, ere the riding-party return,’ said he, entreatingly, after a pause, as he opened the piano, knowing that she sang well and played brilliantly. ‘You know the whole *Trovatore* by heart,’ he added, taking up a piece of music.

‘I know you would prefer something more homely, more—what shall I say?’

‘You mean something national?’

‘Yes,’ said she, seating herself before the instrument laughingly, for she knew how she stirred the young fellow’s heart when she sang ‘Lochaber no More,’ ‘Mary’s Dream,’ or any other tender Scottish song ; and she knew, too, that what

was suitable enough for the drawing-room of Abercairnie would have been as much out of place at their house in Mayfair, as the family piper strutting to and fro on the pavement blowing what the Cockneys would deem 'a tempest of dissonance.'

She ran her white fingers deftly over the keys, sweeping them as it were, and then commenced 'The old Scotch Song,' three verses of which she gave with remarkable sweetness and pathos, a sweetness that Charlie Oliphant was yet to recall, when nearly half the world lay between him and her.

' I was a little child like you,
When first I heard that strain,
And oft I dream of mountains blue,
When it comes back again ;
And with it comes a broken font
Of tears, I deemed was dry ;
Old faces, voices, come as wont,
And will not pass me by.

' I heard my mother sing that song,
And then I left her hall ;
Ere I returned again, 'twas long,
But death had reft me all !
The wallflower hung on turret strong,
The moss on ruin grey,
And all who sung or heard that song,
Were gone—were wede away !'

Another and another song followed, and Charlie hung over her with unmixed delight. As the result of her early training at the hands of an old nurse, Ailie MacAlpine, and of her own taste in reading, Auriel loved well the history, traditions, and songs of her native country, though the cosmopolitan earl deemed them all more than provincial ; thus when she had an appreciative listener like Charlie Oliphant, she would run the latter off in rapid and gleeful succession, and with all the enthusiasm of a soft and poetical nature ; and Charlie, as he looked on her bright face, at times upturned to his, recalled the intoxication of that first night of their meeting at the ball, when he had dwelt upon her features till he could have drawn each and all of them from memory, and for the first time in

his young life became aware that there was a beauty utterly strange to him, and for him but one woman in all the world.

At last he rose to withdraw ; the riding-party were already in the avenue returning.

‘ Good-bye, Lady Auriel ; and a thousand thanks !’

‘ Good-bye, Mr. Oliphant.’

‘ Daljarroch is evidently waiting for me to ride back to barracks with him, and my horse is at the door—good-bye !’

‘ *Au revoir*, rather !’ she added, coquettishly, and he was gone. Then a change came into the gentle young face of Auriel ; her sweet sensitive lips contracted a little, and her dark-blue eyes drooped under the black lashes that contrasted so finely with her brilliant hair.

‘ Poor fellow !’ she whispered to herself, ‘ he is so lovable, so good and honest, so unlike all the rest of those one meets every day and everywhere. It is cruel to let him—well, how shall I phrase it?—worship me thou

Why, Auriel ?

Time will show.

Poor Auriel ! she is a child in some things, but in her heart, perhaps, ‘ the flame has been kindled which consumes all that constitutes childhood.’

CHAPTER II.

WITH THE BRIGADE DEPÔT.

FULL of his own thoughts, Charlie rode by his companion’s side along the woodland way somewhat silently, with the pulses of his heart quickened by the real or fancied pressure of Lady Auriel’s little hand as she bade him farewell.

Did he first learn to love her at the ball months ago ? We rather think not ; his emotion then was admiration pure and simple. ‘ If,’ says a writer, ‘ love be that genuine, true, and most ineffable yearning of one heart for the sole possession

of another, I maintain that it is as impossible to define the exact moment at which its presence first makes itself known, as it is to define the exact moment when the evening dew first rests upon the parched and thirsty ground.' Anyway, he and Lady Auriel had, in their somewhat desultory and uncertain intercourse, reached that delightful state or stage of mutual friendship when they said things *tête-à-tête* which they never would have said across the dinner-table.

Charlie knew that his friend Duncan Daljarroch, a plain, manly, unaffected fellow, some years his senior, was fairly infatuated with Lady Augusta, a cold, proud, and haughty beauty ; but, knowing his wealth, envied him his rather remote chance of success ; for although Duncan was destitute of family rank or high connections, his father, a wealthy West-country manufacturer, had left him a princely fortune, in bank stock, railway shares, and all kinds of lucky and increasing speculations.

'Well, Duncan,' said Charlie, 'you are very silent, old fellow.'

'I was thinking the same of you.'

'Enjoyed your ride, eh? What news?'

'Don't ask me, Charlie,' replied Daljarroch, with a kind of grimace.

'Lady Augusta was cold?'

'As ice, at times ; and I can't make that hussar fellow out.'

'How?' asked Charlie.

'He was so deuced attentive and tender to her ; besides, they seem to have many topics in common that are beyond me—out of my line altogether.'

Charlie's heart beat lightly ; but after a pause, Daljarroch said :

'I always thought he rather affected the younger sister, and I think so still ; but—but——'

'What?' asked Charlie, impatiently, and touching his horse with the spur.

'He was deucedly in my way to-day.'

'Ah! Lady Auriel was otherwise engaged,' said Charlie Oliphant, complacently.

'I mean to try my luck again; we are both invited to a quiet little garden-party on the 10th.'

Charlie's heart beat quicker than ever at this prospect, till Daljarroch spoke again:

'Their only visitor at present seems to be this Sidney St. John. After the London season, Abercairnie was wont to have what in newspaper parlance is termed "a select circle of noble and talented guests;" but rumour says that management and economy are now the order of the day.'

'Everyone, somehow, seems to assign this cousin St. John to one or other sister alternately,' said Oliphant. 'Odd, is it not? By Jove! it is like a bit of a play, or a novel.'

'And for your sake, Charlie, I am sorry to say that I think he and Lady Auriel are engaged, from a remark of the earl's to-day.'

'Engaged!' exclaimed the other, in a breathless voice, and actually feeling himself grow pale, with a fear that, for the future, was to act on all his emotions like a drag.

'She is a sweet girl, with a wonderful beauty of eye,' resumed Daljarroch; 'but all the women of her family have had it—at least, so say all who know anything about the Menteiths. It is a case of hereditary transmission—an heirloom as distinctive as the "pocket-mouth" inherited by the Hapsburgs from Margaret of the Tyrol, or the receding jaw of the Guelphs from the Duke of Carinthia. Pride of race is a ruling passion with Lady Augusta, and her contemptuous indifference to all who are without blue blood is amusingly, and to me painfully, apparent at times. But the other night, Charlie, I took more than usual means or trouble to please, and engaged, or thought I had engaged, her attention; yet after a time she crested up her head like a swan, and, begging pardon, asked me what I had been saying. Flattering that, is it not?'

'Coquetry.'

'Nay, nay ; she is too proud for that.'

'What, then ?'

'Utter indifference,' said Daljarroch, bitterly.

'That may be assumed.'

'I can see how superlatively proud she is, knowing that our positions in society differ—are so far apart. I could give her wealth, but her rank——'

'And beauty would well become a throne !' said Charlie, finding that his companion paused. 'Most attractive is the quieter beauty of her sister ; but what chance has a poor devil like me with her ?'

'Better than mine, I believe, Charlie. You come of the old Oliphants of Aberdalgie, whose blood——'

'Oh, blood be hanged !' exclaimed Charlie. 'I fear that each of us is as great an ass as enthusiastic Claude Melnotte, but will not have Claude's deuced good luck in getting his Pauline in the long-run.'

Daljarroch twirled his moustache and smiled ; and perhaps he had his own reasons for doing so.

He was tall, and manly in form and face. Though not strictly handsome, his countenance was frank and pleasing as his manner. His features were regular, their expression good, and they were well bronzed by exposure ; his thick moustache was dark-brown, like his hair, and, though but the son of a 'self-made man,' he looked every inch a gentleman and soldier ; and his honest, tender, and candid-looking dark-grey eyes convinced one at a glance that he was the king of good fellows, and, good in hand and good in heart, he was idolised by the Albany Highlanders. He had generously pulled Charlie through more than one 'financial crisis,' and assisted more than one brother officer at a similar point, by dashing his autograph across a bit of blue paper.

Both friends, we believe, earnestly wished that they had never met these titled sisters : but now that they *had* seen and met them, and been so far tolerated in their 'set,' they could no more keep away from them than the moth from the candle.

They had the misfortune to belong to the brigade dépôt at Stirling. We say misfortune, as such dépôts, like linked battalions, and short service, and other new military measures, if they last, will end in the utter destruction of *esprit de corps*, the grand old regimental system, and, in short, in sapping the vitality of the British army.

They parted with a friendly nod, and each betook him to his own room, to think over the little events of the afternoon. Charlie was looking forward to the meeting on the 10th, four days hence ; but Daljarroch had earlier expectations than he had mentioned of bringing his love affair, perhaps, to a crisis.

It is impossible not to admit that Charlie—such is the weakness of human nature—*was* somewhat dazzled and flattered by the friendship of a girl so highly born, as well as so fair and so faultless in manner, face and style as Lady Auriel Menteith.

‘Auriel!’ He often repeated her name when alone with great tenderness, as if all the hopes of life were entwined with the idea of her. ‘Engaged!’ he muttered, as he flung himself into a chair ; and the hint dropped by Duncan Daljarroch pierced his heart like a poniard, while his comparative poverty seemed to fetter his hands and prevent him in any way bringing his doubts to a solution.

‘The Duke of Albany’s Highlanders’ had from boyhood been his home, as its ranks had been the home of his family for more than one generation before him. In the regiment his father had been known, during the wars in Central India, as ‘Phadrig Staun,’ or Stubborn Pat of Dalhonzie, though the lands thereof had been lost in his grandfather’s time : and what booted it that he came of the Oliphants, who were Lords of Oliphant, Strathgeith, and Aberdalgie, when nothing remained of all that but an old Highland claymore—an heirloom, with the mystic letter S in its hilt, and ‘No Union’ on the blade, showing that it was more than a hundred and fifty years old? and, though well burnished by his soldier-servant, was deemed an antiquated weapon for such a dandy as he.

Yet such old family relics were far from uncommon in our Highland regiments.

'Engaged, and to that fellow St. John!' he muttered, as he threw off his coat, lit a cigar, and began to smoke furiously. 'Then, if so, what chance have I of entering stakes for such a race?'

Sidney St. John was far from bad-looking—he was even handsome, thanks to a West-end tailor and a fairly good figure, while riding, driving, and cavalry-drill had done the rest; and he had been, his fair cousins knew, in and out of love a score of times.

Sidney's future expectations were, it was supposed, excellent; meantime, a spring handicap or two had left him with a solid balance at his banker's; and in many things Charlie Oliphant would no more think of going neck and neck with him than swimming against the tide. He owned to himself that he had no precise right to be jealous of St. John, or anyone else; but that conviction in nowise affected the question, and jealous he consequently was.

A very few years before this time, Charlie and St. John had been together at the Military College at Sandhurst, and the latter treasured a grudge against the former for having, despite the adjutant, punished him for some alleged 'check' by 'turning him up'—a well-known species of practical joke in that establishment, and which consists of tilting suddenly up the lower end of an iron bedstead when the occupant is asleep, as it folds up by a pair of central hinges; and the culprit is roughly awakened by finding his heels in the air, with his regulation portmanteau on the top of them, and ready to fall on his head if he makes the least attempt to wriggle out of the trap in which he is placed. And this trick St. John never precisely forgot or forgave, though he might have fared worse in the old idiotic days there, when 'neuxes' were flogged with buff belts, half roasted at the fire, and then hung half naked out of the window in cold and frosty winter nights.

Charlie thought enviously—it was not in human nature to help it—of the splendid opportunities afforded by cousinship, and, more than all, propinquity, by a residence, however brief, to St. John at Abercairnie Castle ; and then he mentally contrasted the apartment in which he had last seen Lady Auriel with his sub's quarters in Stirling Castle.

It was a large room, with great windows and a vast fireplace, whitewashed and furnished with little more than plain barrack furniture and some huge overland trunks, swords hanging on pegs, guns and fishing-rods, boots, bats, and bottles, with old cigar-boxes, etc. It was not the kind of princely boudoir 'Ouida' bestows upon her pampered guardsmen, yet kings of Scotland had in that room held councils, received ambassadors, and signed treaties for war and peace; and to that room had James II. come, after he slew the traitor Douglas and tossed him over the adjacent window.

On the bare white walls there hung neither trophy nor tapestry now ; but there was more than one caricature, done in burnt cork, of the colonel commanding and other staff officers.

He had been letting his thoughts soar too high, like the little boy who longed for the moon. Better stifle them and thrust all such visions aside !

A little time—a few months, certainly—would find him face to face with the Afghans, and too probably he would never again look on the golden-brown hair and long black eye-lashes of Auriel Menteith, who was doubtless destined to be the bride of some one far, far above an almost penniless Highland subaltern.

In the shadowy castle square the pipes were now sounding for mess, waking its echoes to 'The Kail-brose of old Scotland'—the dépôt mess, with its well-bred banter, good-fellowship and stale old jokes ; so he threw on his mess-jacket and went thither, prepared, with billiards or somehow, to kill care, and 'make a night of it ;' but the gravity, abstraction, and early departure from table of his friend Daljarroch, gave him some food for thought and anxious surmise.

CHAPTER III.

THE MENTEITHS OF ABERCAIRNIE.

ERECTED in days long before Scotland and England ceased to be separate and independent kingdoms, by the Menteiths, after quitting the cradle of their family, on an isle in the Loch of Menteith, the castle of Abercairn is situated near the Highland border of Stirlingshire, on high and rocky ground, overlooking wooded glens and fertile, flat carse lands. On one side are wild hills, with the dark rolling Teith flowing between them; on the other, a level country, beautiful, occasionally woody and sylvan in aspect, exhibiting a constant alternation of fields in the highest state of tillage, plantations, orchards, all in the most luxuriant vegetation.

Abercairn is a common example of those old Scottish mansions that generally exhibit the characteristics of distinct ages and styles of architecture; the basement being generally the massive and plainly built ashlar tower of the fifteenth century, while the upper and more remote portion shows the grafting of the seventeenth, copied from the chateaux of France and Burgundy, but altered now to suit the requirements of the age of steam.

It is indeed an old, old house, of the days when trap-doors and sliding panels, a double dungeon, a *panier de mort* above the gate, and a dule-tree before it, with a secret-escape, were arrangements without which no Scottish baronial dwelling was complete—when dark deeds were of daily occurrence, and ghosts of not unfrequent appearance by night—a house in which, for generations of Menteiths, there had been life and death, joy and sorrow, births and bridals, fasts and feasts—at which more than one King of Scotland had been served on bended knee, after hunting or hosting in pastoral Menteith, or among the mountains of the Lennox.

In Abercairn nothing could surpass, in a private family, the grandeur of the picture-gallery and presence-chambers,

though the Jamesons, Lelys, and Lawrences, in their long oak frames, looked haughty, vapid, and listless enough. There was Malise, Earl of Abercairnie, in a crimson suit and furred cloak, by Hans Holbein, in 1534—the same peer who sought the Duke of Vendome's daughter as a bride for James V. ; and there was Earl Malcolm, in plate armour, just as he had led a brigade of Scottish horse on the field of Kilsyth.

The fretted and frescoed ceilings all spoke of ancient splendour, as did the priceless tapestries of Arras, from the old Manufacture Royale des Gobelins, in the Rue Mouffetard ; and there were art treasures, accumulated by generations, that served, unfortunately, but to remind their present owners that, unless saved somehow from the ruin that was impending, they would all find their way to the auction-room—all 'Wardour Street wares' we fear Mr. Sidney St. John deemed them.

With all its splendour and proud old associations, and with all her innate vanity of rank and ancient race, Lady Augusta could only tolerate a residence at Abercairnie when surrounded there by a circle of the same friends she had been wont to meet everywhere during the London season ; but Lady Auriel, different by temperament, nature, and even in some sense by education—certainly by taste—loved the old place for itself, and was the idol of the people upon the—we are sorry to say—heavily-dipped estates.

To the surprise of their friends, the Abercairnie family, by returning early to Scotland, had anticipated the close of the London season, which is at its height in May, and the best of which is generally past in June. Thus, so soon as the meeting of the Four-in-hand Club was over, and the subsequent Derby, they had taken their departure ; but still the mind of Lady Augusta, amid the solitude of the old castle, reverted ever and anon to the vast assemblage by the Serpentine, where, on the 21st of May, she had seen some twenty teams start—the coach of the Life Guards, greys, roans, and bays—each with its freight of passengers, fashionable and fair,

impressing all with the conviction that Britain bears the bell for the beauty of her women and her horses ; and anon to the splendour of the grand stand at the Derby—the excitement, the race, a view of the paddock with its great hedges clipped like a wall, its central tuft of trees and rich sward, and the bets of more than gloves, gracefully lost, and prettily booked with jewelled pencils.

They had anticipated the close of the season, we say ; and thus Lady Augusta—for the hot crowded ball-rooms whither she had gone night after night to complain of fatigue, and where, perhaps, the only man she ever cared to come and talk with her was staring at her hopelessly over a mass of human heads ; and from whence she would drive shivering home at dawn ; for the Belgravian dinner-parties, the Albert Hall concerts, the opera, flower-shows, garden-parties, drums and ‘at homes,’ where she met the same people and heard the same things said over and over again, *ad nauseam*—had exchanged the green leafy woodlands that bordered the Teith and the beautiful hills that look down on Lochearn and the birch-shaded Pass of Lenny, and withal was not content ; for their usual circle of friends had been limited to her cousin St. John, and a few others, that more might be spent in the great house at Mayfair, when the season opened in town again ; though sooth to say, from some hints let fall by the earl, there was a probability of their not seeing ‘town’ for some time to come !

Malcolm, Earl of Abercairnie, Viscount Ochtertyre, Hereditary Keeper of the Castle of Doune, and so forth, was a widower, and his family consisted of the two ladies we have named, and his son and heir, the little Lord Ochtertyre, Master of Menteith, then at Eton.

His lordship was a very fair sample of what many Scottish peers are nowadays, and have been for some generations past, having little beyond a monetary interest in the soil or the people. Romance and enthusiasm in anything formed as little a portion of his lordship's nature as Scottish patri-

otism, and the only emotion in his heart—family pride excepted—was a little pride in, and regard for, the Duke of Albany's Highlanders, in which he had seen a little pleasant service during the long years of a 'piping time of peace.'

By various unlucky speculations and monetary extravagances and mistakes in life—notably by the unexpected suspension of a bank—his resources were now crippled to an extent under which his proud spirit writhed; but rendered him not indisposed to view with enforced complaisance the attentions of the wealthy commoner ('plebeian,' Lady Augusta called him), Duncan Daljarroch, to the eldest daughter of his family.

The inordinate pride of birth and descent indulged in by the latter lady was simply absurd in a really high-born girl, whose pedigree occupied four columns of Burke, and especially in a land of long pedigrees, where even old Alpin Mac-Alpine, the lodge-keeper, could confidently have reminded her that

'The hills, the valleys, and Clan Alpine,
Are the oldest things in Albyn.'

With all this vanity of long descent, in the Scottish peerage like many others, the Menteiths' honour was a dubious one.

As landed barons they had become early adherents of the English Edwards against their own country; they had sold themselves to the English factions again and again, and the last who did so was one who deserted at the head of his regiment to William of Orange in youth, and bartered his union vote in maturer years for £500, and remained coldly and steadily aloof from the perils of the '15 and '45; and like his descendants, had ever been steadily against Scotland and her interests, or utterly reckless of them, in the House of Lords, though they had always a seat therein, as peers of Britain under the suitable title of Barons Birgham.

The earl had the patronage of one or two kirks; but as he deemed Calvinism the religion of the Scottish vulgar, he had

long since embraced Episcopacy : and Lady Augusta went further, for she was deeply imbued with high-flying Ritualism.

It was deemed rather anomalous that a man so anti-national should retain a family piper ; and the earl, who had no love for anything Scottish but his lands and his rents, would speedily have abolished such an appendage, but the fact of one being maintained at Balmoral and another at Sandringham, apart from ancient local usage, made it fashionable.

We are sorry to introduce a character so little lovable as this cold, hard, and calculating representative of a cold, hard, and calculating race ; there are a few, very few bright exceptions, but his is a common one among those whose noble names still figure in 'The Union Roll,' as it is termed.

'What are you so intent upon, Auriel ?' asked Lady Augusta, who found her sister busy in the library, after the two friends had ridden away ; 'I have thrice addressed you without getting an answer.'

'Intent upon,' said Auriel, colouring slightly—'oh ! I am only reading up about Peshawur.'

'Peshawur ! where on earth is that ?'

'Near Afghanistan.'

'And in what can it possibly interest you ?' asked Augusta, cresting up her head.

'The war is there now, Augusta, and everyone should know all about it.'

'Ah, indeed !' said Lady Augusta, drily, as she turned away.

If engaged to Sidney St. John, it was strange that little Auriel should be interested in the place that Charlie had spoken about.

But she read up all about it in the 'Gazetteer,' only, of course, that she might be able to talk to him of it at the garden-party ; and as she read, her heart swelled with pity to think of Charlie Oliphant being condemned to exile in such a place, for she had a deeper interest in him than she chose to acknowledge, even to herself.

CHAPTER IV.

WORLDLINESS.

NEXT morning two important events occurred at Abercairn. The earl had a letter from Captain Daljarroch, the first of its kind he had ever received, and a visit from his lawyer, both of which, in another and a past time, he would have treated with haughty contempt, but could not afford to do so now.

Honest and loving Duncan Daljarroch had resolved to end the feverish doubts that tormented his heart, to put all to the issue and learn his fate ; thus he had written to the earl, stating his love and admiration of Lady Augusta, modestly hinting, too, at his own unworthiness and presumption, and winding up with certain solid arguments concerning his ample means for making suitable settlements, and his future prospects beyond even these. Moreover, he now deemed himself on such a footing, so far, with Lady Augusta, as might lead her to expect such a move.

He said nothing as yet of this formal and important letter to Charlie Oliphant, for three reasons ; first, he knew that Charlie vainly loved Lady Auriel—vainly, so far as his monetary prospects were concerned, and Duncan hoped his young friend would get over it all as a youthful fancy, when he found himself face to face with the enemy ; secondly, he was loth, in the event of a refusal, to show even his friend how he had been humbled ; and thirdly, in the case of success, he felt doubtful how to explain that he owed it to mere wealth rather than merit—for Duncan was a modest fellow—but wealth which must leave poor Charlie far behind in the matrimonial race indeed. And hence the apparent abstraction and preoccupation he had exhibited at the mess-table over-night ; and thus it was that, a little to her surprise, the earl requested to see Lady Augusta alone in the library, while Auriel was having a morning canter through the park with her cousin St. John.

Unlike her younger sister, the beauty of Lady Augusta,

while much greater and more decided in its degree, was somewhat of a brunette character. She had dark eyes and dark hair, with eyebrows almost black, yet straight and imparting great decision to a face that was proud, haughty, and very patrician, though a softness was given to it by the length of her eye-lashes. She was above the middle height considerably, full and round in form, and beautifully delicate and symmetrical. In every movement of hers there was a subtle and languid grace. She was what a writer terms, 'one of those favoured few in this world, who could do a most ungracious deed in so gracious a manner, that her victim would be fascinated and delighted.'

She possessed to the full all that peculiarity of style which Lord Jeffrey says is only to be found in a perfect woman of fashion ; great quietude and delicacy of manner, with a dignity and self-possession that puts vulgarity out of countenance and all presumption down ; a soft, low voice, and ease of diction ; perfect taste in conversation, a languid spirit, and indolent disdain of all display—all of which are too often united to heartlessness and ambition.

Bewitching and dangerous withal, she was worldly, and hard in thought and judgment, as yet ; we say as yet, for a time of change was to come upon her.

'You wish to see me, papa ?' she said, as the earl, courteously as he would have done to a stranger, placed one of the luxurious easy-chairs for her near his own.

He sighed, placed one knee over the other, lay back in his capacious writing-chair, with his elbows resting thereon, the tips of his long slender fingers joined together as if he was about to pray, his gold eye-glass nicely balanced on the bridge of his thin aristocratic nose, though his pale-blue eyes looked keenly over it. He was past sixty, and eminently noble-looking, though less manly than some of the mailed and wigged Menteiths of other times, who scowled out of their frames. He had thin white silky hair, but his forehead was usually smooth and unmarked by a line of thought.

‘Who was your visitor in the library this morning, papa?’ asked Lady Augusta.

‘My agent from Edinburgh.’

‘Which?’ she asked, but with a tone of utter indifference.

‘Mr. Wadsett.’

‘You look weary, dear papa; you have had a long conference with this tiresome person.’

‘A conference that forebodes—nay, announces ruin, unless—unless——’

‘Unless what, papa?’

The earl paused, and she read, for the first time in her life, a painful expression in his face, selfish and proud though he was—the expression, it might be, of a strong swimmer battling with a heavy ebb-tide, or of some such calamity as makes the heart sick.

‘Speaking for himself and his partner, Mr. Thirlage, the other W.S., the man was neither so tractable nor so suave as I have hitherto found him,’ said the earl. ‘He talked again and again, most offensively as it sounded, of having fought for and protected the interests of his clients—meaning *us*—till he could fight for and protect them no longer; that the game was nearly played out—rents and everything had long been forestalled; that money-lenders were becoming clamorous—money was tight, not to be had, and that for us nothing remained but a cheap continental tour, or—Holyrood.’

‘Holyrood!’ exclaimed Lady Augusta, in an accent of horror.

‘Yes, Holyrood,’ replied the earl, in a low voice, as if the name stuck in his throat. ‘Well, it is the extreme of monetary degradation, though it affords, of course, a sanctuary, where none could touch me till—till matters were settled somehow.’

He was very pale, and as much agitated as he ever permitted himself to appear.

‘Oh, papa!’ exclaimed Lady Augusta, looking round her with utter bewilderment, but never dreaming of, childlike,

throwing her soft arms round the old man's neck and embracing him.

'Say nothing of all this to Auriel—she'll learn it all soon enough,' said the earl, who, if he had a softness in the world, felt it for the golden-haired Auriel.

Augusta could scarcely realise what all this meant, and as she glanced at her splendid surroundings, it seemed impossible that they should pass from her or into other hands ; but the sense of impending evil was not the less heavy because it was vaguely or imperfectly understood by her, whose first disgust had been the sudden curtailment of the London season.

'After this preamble, Augusta,' said the earl in a hard, dry voice, 'you will, I trust, listen to me calmly. Captain Duncan Daljarroch, whose attentions have been sufficiently marked of late, has formally asked permission to pay his addresses, and the offers he makes as to settlements are unimpeachable, and may save us from utter shipwreck.'

'Duncan Daljarroch !' exclaimed Lady Augusta, with supreme scorn ; 'and have you consented ?'

'Not yet, darling,' said the earl, almost meekly.

'And you *dare* not, papa !' exclaimed Augusta, starting from her chair, and cresting up swan-like her proud head, while her dark eyes flashed under their long lashes.

'Listen to me, Augusta,' pleaded the earl. 'I have no hope now of monetary aid from any hand or source ; I am completely in the hands of long-patient creditors, who, if not satisfied, will take from us all we possess. Captain Daljarroch loves you well—he can and will assist us ; and the rumour alone of a wealthy marriage may avert, or delay, impending ruin.'

Augusta bit her haughty lip, and even tears sparkled in her beautiful eyes.

'I will never consent !' she said, while beating the floor with an impatient little foot ; yet while she spoke there flashed upon her the conviction of what this ruin would be to

her and to them all, and that she had passed four seasons in London without the vestige of a proposal ; that many other girls were out of the 'matrimonial market,' and that matters were looking serious that way, though her rare beauty was undeniable. Then she thought of the vast disparity in rank, race, and family position, and said impetuously : 'A Menteith of Abercairnrie never made a *mésalliance* yet !'

'At least it is not on record,' urged the earl, whose family pride was second to his selfishness at that particular time ; 'yet I would, with all his wealth, that this man were only better born !'

'And you would sell me to him, papa !' said Augusta, loftily.

The poor earl had nothing else to sell, so he replied meekly :

'You use an unpleasant term, Lady Augusta ! Captain Daljarroch——'

'*Duncan* Daljarroch—please don't omit anything,' interrupted the proud beauty, scornfully. 'Well ?'

'He has the position of a gentleman ; he is highly educated, a well-bred and handsome man ; he loves you dearly ; more than all, he has ample means, and his proposed settlements are noble indeed—what more would you have ?' said the earl, querulously, and he wiped his glasses with a cambric handkerchief and replaced them on his nose.

'More ?' repeated Augusta, who had no words to express her mortification, as innate ambition had never, until now, left her without a hope of attaining higher rank than had ever been won by a daughter of the House of Abercairnrie ; and she thought, too, of the speculation, the ill-nature, the exultation, real or mock pity, of her 'set' in London with something akin to horror. But the earl now entered into details of his interview with Mr. Wadsett, and ere he had concluded, Augusta—her pride partially crushed—was seated in her chair, wringing her white hands, in a mode that would have confounded—nay, horrified—worthy Daljarroch, and saying ever and anon :

'Heaven help us, papa—why have we become so poor ?'

'To go into that is vain. I ask you now but to save yourself and me,' replied the earl, wearily. He had all that well-bred horror of 'scenes' inculcated by society, and here he found himself in the very middle of one. 'Can you, at least, not respect this man, Augusta?'

'I do respect him, papa; but as for love—and him the son of a tradesman, and that odious woman his mother, who dresses like—oh! what does she dress like?—so *gauche*, in such awful bad form—oh! papa, I shall die!'

'No, you won't,' said the earl, rising and kissing her; 'suffer yourself and me to be saved from the disgrace of bankruptcy; take the hand that an honest man, a brave and worthy officer, offers you in all honour. Augusta Menteith, it is our only way of escape!'

But for the necessity of 'escape,' it is doubtful if the earl would have valued greatly the honesty, bravery, or worth of Duncan Daljarroch.

'And so, papa,' said Augusta (who had not quite foreseen this sudden result of her quiet flirtation, for such had she deemed it, though thinking a proposal, to be laughed at, might come in time), with something between a scornful laugh and a sob in her slender white throat, 'I must marry this man only because he is like the Thane of Cawdor?'

'Eh—what—how?'

'A prosperous gentleman,' said she, mockingly.

'A prosperous gentleman, certainly, darling.'

'You mean a parvenu, to whom I must sacrifice myself.'

'You must tame this terrible spirit,' said the earl, referring to that inordinate pride of birth which she had inherited from himself, and which he had left nothing undone to cultivate and confirm; 'tame it, dearest Augusta, and receive him in the way I wish you, and which the dire change in our fortune compels! You know the tenor of your uncle St. John's will, Augusta, and, as if in the spirit of it, I think Sidney affects Auriel and not you, yet he delays oddly, and—and Captain Daljarroch's proposal for your hand comes most opportunely.'

'I am pretty well read in the "Douglas Baronage" and "Burke's Landed Gentry," but we may look vainly in either for the name of Daljarroch,' said Augusta, resuming her scornful bearing; but, indeed, it had scarcely ever left her.

'There is a place so called in Ayrshire. I would that we could connect the captain with it!'

'Except at that wretched Edinburgh Assembly, I never danced with him. Once I praised his polo-playing somewhere; but even in London I only thought him useful at garden-parties and so forth, papa.'

'Useful, my dear?'

'Yes,' said she, impatiently.

'How, Augusta?'

'He could always find the footman when we wanted to get away, and knew where to find a friend we wanted to see; and now I am to marry him! It is too absurd! Oh, how can you consent, papa?'

'My poverty and not my will consents,' said the earl, as his head sank on his breast. 'But the man loves you very dearly; I can easily see that.'

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

'But the son of a tradesman, papa!'

'Who, or what, are half the peerage, Augusta?'

'Of Britain, perhaps—such are made every month,' replied the proud girl, loftily; 'but no mortal power now can make a peer of Scotland, or of England either. That power ended with the Union.'

'There goes the luncheon-bell! You are a good girl for obeying your old father, and he loves you dearly.'

Then the earl did what was seldom his custom, gave her a cold kiss on the forehead, which she as coldly received, for father and daughter were alike worldly to the utmost extent of worldliness.

At luncheon the earl sipped his port almost with gusto again. The cellars of Abercairnle were famous—quite historical, in fact; but sooth to say, there were just then more

cobwebs than bottles in the bins, as the dignified old gentleman who condescended to act as butler had more than once hinted.

Great was the surprise, and not a little the pleasure, of Auriel when she heard of what was on the tapis ; for she had been, though imperfectly, aware of impending family troubles which the known wealth of Daljarroch would prevent. But her pleasure was caused, perhaps, by the secret hopes given by this departure from the necessity or requisite of high birth in suitors, and her thoughts naturally and instantly reverted to Charlie Oliphant ; yet futile indeed would that interest have seemed, could she have overheard some of her father's remarks to Lady Augusta.

'Once you are fairly settled, even affianced, Augusta, Sidney will undoubtedly—indeed he must, as regards his father's will—turn his attention to his cousin Auriel ; and then I shall die happy,' said the earl, with would-be pathos, as he had not the least intention of dying until he could not possibly help it. 'And as for the captain's particular friend, young Oliphant,' said the earl again, as certain suspicions occurred to him, 'we must drop *him* ; he evidently admires Auriel—an idea almost too absurd to be thought of.'

'Of course, papa. He is one of the Aberdalgie Oliphants, however.'

'Poh ! what does that matter ?'

An angry sigh escaped Augusta, as she wished that her suitor could boast of such a lineage ; but as Daljarroch and Oliphant were inseparables, the earl saw and found ere long the difficulty of sedulously cultivating one friend while utterly ignoring the other.

'It *is* awkward in some ways, Augusta,' said he, 'when one has opened the house, as we have done, to this young fellow, to suddenly shut it.'

'And without some explainable reason, papa.'

So ere that eventful day was done, the Lady Augusta promised to meet pleasantly and to receive the addresses of

Duncan Daljarroch, hoping to amuse herself with his honest heart in the meantime ; but hoping, too, that something might turn up to help her out of the desperate game ere she wearied of it.

But her hopes proved vain in the end ; nor could honest Duncan have dreamed that mortal woman would have conceived a scheme so cold and calculating.

So after much thought and care, the earl framed a suitable reply to Daljarroch's letter and requested an interview. How the lawyer's visit influenced the tone of that reply the captain never knew ; as little could he conceive, save for that visit, how cutting and contemptuous the tenor of it might have been.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE LIBRARY WITH 'PAPA.'

NEXT day, Duncan Daljarroch mounted his horse and rode from Stirling alone. We have said that he had merely smiled in reply to Charlie's remark about Claude Melnotte ; now he had his own reasons for laughing aloud in veritable glee, as he rode along the wooded and winding highway that led to Abercairnie, where he was duly, after sending up his card, ushered into the library.

Old-fashioned and stately was the greeting of the earl, and most cordial, for him, was the shake of his long thin hand ; but he laughed in a strange and certainly, even Duncan thought, very unhilarious way. By nature he was a fretful and intolerant man, whom little in this world pleased ; yet with all his fretfulness his bearing was ever cold, severe, and imperturbable.

He had just been, as he informed Duncan, worried by two deputations of plebeian fellows, whom he had summarily dismissed in a mode little calculated to add to his local popu-

larity. To both he had utterly refused to subscribe a penny, or even accord the use of his august name as patron. The object of one was to enhance the attractions of the forthcoming national games on Bannockburn-day ; the other, a festival in honour of Burns—both of which he scouted with aristocratic hauteur. ‘Burns ! who was he !—a ploughman, a vulgar fellow who wrote vulgar verses, which, to use the words of his friend the Earl of E——, the hereditary bailie of Cunningham, “he had never read, and never intended to read.”’

Duncan Daljarroch, who was intensely national, could only smile feebly at this outburst of cosmopolitanism, which rather grated on his feelings.

In ancient times, the library in which the earl received him had been the hall, when the Menteiths were merely lesser or landed barons, and when they and their vassals fed at the same board, though the former sat upon the daïs, and the latter below the salt. The bookcases of native oak, filled by rare and mighty folios and quartos, encroached upon its size ; but the vaulted stone roof, and the great mantel-piece that projected over the open fire-place, surmounted by the Menteith arms—*azure*, three buckles *or*, and crested by a lymphad—remained unchanged, as when yule logs burned on the hearth, or when the yew dule-tree without was seldom without its ‘tassel’ in the shape of a hanged man, or when the stone in yonder window-seat was worn, as the visitor may see it still, by the headsman sharpening his axe—or, as some prosaic folks aver, by the cook or carver sharpening his knife.

This antique chamber was furnished with large and luxurious easy-chairs, and spread on its floor were several dun deer-skins, the spoil of Glenfinglass. The windows overlooked a great garden, where, on a portion that was green-sward, Lady Auriel and her cousin St. John could be seen, with racquets and balls, absorbed in a game of lawn-tennis, with two young lady visitors as opponents.

A full-length of the earl (by Sir Francis Grant), as a hand-

some young subaltern of the Albany Highlanders, hung on the wall. With his Highland jacket and gold epaulettes, plumed bonnet and Stuart tartan trews, he looked very unlike 'the lean and slippered pantaloon' who now welcomed Daljarroch to Abercairnie.

The earl had, we have said, a thin aristocratic nose, not unlike that of his eldest daughter, with a firmly formed but haughty upper-lip, a somewhat pendulous chin, and mild, faded blue eyes. He generally used an eye-glass, but now wore a pair of slender gold spectacles, which he pushed high up on his forehead in a queer way peculiar to some spectacle-wearers, in order that he might see his future son-in-law the better; and he was well pleased to perceive and to know that Duncan Daljarroch was a man thoroughly accustomed to good society, perfect in his demeanour and bearing, and one who had seen much of life in other lands; for Duncan had won his V.C. by his valour and humanity when serving with another regiment against a hill tribe in India.

'You are the eldest son of your family?' said the earl, opening the trenches at once, and lying back in his easy-chair, with his thin white hands stretched out on the knobs thereof, a large rare diamond sparkling on the finger of one; 'or the only son, I presume?'

Duncan started, and for a moment his handsome countenance seemed to cloud and to grow pale.

'I *had* an elder brother once, but he is dead—poor Willie!'

'Ah!' said the earl, as if this was satisfactory.

'I am the sole heir of my father, my lord, and all that I have in the world I lay, with my love, at your daughter's feet.'

'All?'

'Save, as yet, my dear mother's jointure, which I pray God she may long enjoy.'

'So do I, sir—so do I.'

'I thank you, my lord, for your kind wishes.'

'Did your brother die young?' asked the earl, who had detected in Duncan's face the cloud referred to.

'No—almost recently.'

'In full manhood?'

'Yes, poor Willie found a grave in India, on the borders of Afghanistan, my lord. But we need not enter on *his* story; his life was a lost one, to himself and to all,' added Duncan, sadly.

'Ah, we won't think of it, then,' said the earl, to whom anything doleful was distasteful.

'At a time of joy like this—joy at least to me, especially—I would indeed rather not think of Willie,' said Daljarroch, in a lowered voice; for the fate of his brother (of whom more anon) was indeed a sad one.

Willie! His mind flashed back to the days of their sinless infancy and joyous boyhood, when their childish voices had made a humble home happy to a loving father and mother; when together they had coned their tasks, or played the truant among the Campsie Hills, bird-nested in the woods, and pelted each other with apples in the tiny orchard; and a thousand kindly, loving, and sad memories came back with the dead Willie's name—memories such as my lord the earl could little have understood, and certainly not appreciated—memories of a time ere Willie, by his wild and reckless life, nearly broke his mother's heart, roused the wrath of a father, and led to his being expelled and becoming an outcast, to find a grave as a private soldier among the wild Afreedies; and Duncan sighed as he thought of the name, the memory, and the human existence that now, for urgent reasons, must be committed to utter oblivion.

'And I have your lordship's permission to address Lady Augusta?' said Daljarroch, in a voice that was tremulous with eagerness and emotion.

The only immediate reply of the earl was a really cordial grasp of his hand, as he remembered the last occupant of Duncan's chair—Mr. Wadsett, W.S.—and all the unpleasant things the latter had said while seated therein.

'From the moment I saw Lady Augusta I presumed to

love her,' continued the other, in a voice still tremulous with many emotions, among which doubt of success was not the least; 'but I have ever found that she did not seem to—to regard me with favour. I feel that all I have to offer—the entire devotion of a life, and the comparative wealth which my good father left me—are as nothing in comparison with the happiness she could bestow upon me. But at times she has seemed so indifferent, that I have more than once retired with an emotion nearly akin to despair.'

'You mistake her bearing, my dear sir,' said the earl soothingly, and with a fidgety manner, as he hated everything emotional as 'bad form—very.' 'There is usually no coquetry in Lady Augusta, and yet such a bearing may just have been a little of it. She is young and pretty, though after her fourth season.'

'Pretty, my lord! she is superbly beautiful! If I could only hope that she would, in time, love me! Is it your wish, my lord?'

'It is my hope that she will marry you,' was the odd response of the earl, who did not see what love had to do with it. When *he* made a sacrifice of himself in St. George's, Hanover Square, that element had not certainly entered into his calculations. 'You have my best wishes for success, Captain Daljarroch.'

A great emotion of gratitude gushed up in the warm heart of Daljarroch, yet his reply was curiously prosaic.

'My legal agents shall put themselves in communication with those of your lordship, when the time comes for doing so. They are Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett.'

'Gad! that is remarkable—very; those fellows are also mine,' exclaimed the earl. 'Monetary matters will thus be greatly facilitated: but, as yet, we shall not enter on details.'

'Oh no!' exclaimed Daljarroch, in a low and earnest voice, for to talk of such with his heart full of love was most repugnant to him, however satisfactory it might have been to the needy earl, who said:

'You will remain to luncheon, and meanwhile we shall seek Augusta.'

'Is—is she prepared to receive me?'

'Yes.'

Daljarroch's heart bounded anew, and he followed the earl to the drawing-room, from whence, as if she dreaded—which was perhaps the case—to meet her suitor, she had retired into the conservatory, where the earl found her, and whispered in haste :

'Receive him properly, Augusta—wealth such as his makes the wheels of life run smoothly, and romantic marriages are seldom made nowadays, in our set at least.'

She saw Daljarroch approaching, between the rows of flowers that loaded the shelves and walls of the marble-floored conservatory, and a sigh of impatience escaped her. She was gracefully attired in a maize-coloured costume that became well the somewhat brunette character of her beauty, and her rich, dark hair was dressed to perfection by the skilful hands of her French maid, Fleurette. Every day she seemed a lovely picture enshrined amid sunshine and flowers ; but aware of what was impending, feeling as if somewhat brought to bay, she took refuge in the adoption of a bearing of coldness and hauteur most chilling and perplexing—yea, well-nigh crushing to her lover.

'I am *de trop*, and shall leave you together,' said the earl ; and he bowed himself back from the conservatory into the inner drawing-room, with an air and mode that might have suited old Holyrood, or the Court of Louis le Grande.

Lady Augusta had 'all the self-possession and coldness patent to ladies who have seen a great deal, and talked a great deal more ;' and she had, moreover, all the confidence peculiar to breeding, class, position, and those who mix, as she had done, in what is termed 'society.'

She put a small white hand into Daljarroch's, and let it rest there passively, but without a vestige of responsive pressure,

Ere she was aware, he had raised it to his lips ; but in her breast there was no responding thrill of love to his tender, respectful, and passionate impulse, and for a moment Duncan thought of Pygmalion and his favourite statue ; and a dread of failure *after all* came over him, for her magnificent face seemed, for a time, as if cut in marble.

CHAPTER VI.

DUNCAN PROPOSES.

SHE was an earl's daughter, true ; and Duncan Daljarroch was but the son of a manufacturer, a tradesman—of a rich one, however, who had risen from the ranks of the great army of the people by his own honesty and industry.

By education, perception, position and nature, Duncan was, however, a gentleman, and a refined one.

His great love for Lady Augusta made him earnest, tender and true, while the old manufacturer's wealth gave him courage to aspire ; and times were changed in Abercairnie, since the headsman, or the cook—it matters not which—whetted his blade on the stone referred to ; but to some degree the spirit of that age still lingered in the mind of Augusta.

Duncan still retained her cold and passive hand ; but her face was averted, and he could only see her clearly-cut and exquisite profile.

'Augusta—dearest Augusta ! turn, look upon me !' urged Daljarroch, tenderly.

'Well !' she faltered.

'I have your father's consent to love you—to win you, if I can ; and from all the past you must know how well I love you.'

She only sighed when he paused, and cast down her eyes,

'O', my darling!—permit me to call you so! I am a man of few words, and in the fulness of my hope and joy I scarcely know what I say; but *will you marry me?*' he asked, in a whisper.

She remained silent, pale and tremulous.

'Speak,' he whispered tenderly, yet, from the depth of his emotion, huskily; 'speak! I am aware of all my deficiencies in talent and rank—my own unworthiness of you; but no woman ever heard my lips ask the question I have now asked before, and no woman shall hear me ask it again, as I have God to answer to, Augusta!'

For a man of 'few words,' Duncan perhaps did very well, though we suppose no two men ever proposed in exactly the same way; but it all comes to the same thing in the end.

She thought over all her father had urged and said and threatened; she looked into the honest, earnest, and tender eyes of him who was really the victim, and whispered:

'Yes.'

He drew her to his breast and strove to kiss her, but she eluded him, and he found only a little jewelled ear where her lips should have been.

'Please do not, Captain Daljarroch,' she murmured.

'*Captain Daljarroch?*'

'I can't call you Duncan just yet; and all this is so like a romance or play, and both, you know, are so absurd!' she said, with a little hysterical, half-angry laugh, while there was a subtle ring of pride and scorn in her sweet voice—a ring which Duncan failed to detect, though her coolness puzzled him.

'God knows how tenderly I love you, Augusta, and how I hope to lay out my life in the future but to render yours happy!' sighed Daljarroch, as he raised her hand to his lips.

Far more tender and more perfect women than Lady Augusta are not insensible to such a tribute as was rendered to her by Duncan Daljarroch; but her heart was not quite moved as yet.

‘I suppose there is such a thing as love at first sight,’ she said, with a little spasmodic laugh; ‘at least, novel-writers and poets always put great stress thereon.’ But thinking some response was absolutely necessary, with her face on his shoulder, she murmured: ‘I always liked you, Duncan, better than any other man.’

The admission was a very simple one; but his heart leaped at the words, and the mention of his own name, as his left arm went round her waist.

So honest, warm-hearted, and earnest Duncan Daljarroch felt ready to lay heart and soul, existence and fortune, at the dainty feet of this proud and passionless beauty, with whom he had not a thought or sentiment in common! And thus, from that hour—from that moment—they were engaged to be wedded—to take each other for better or worse, and the compact was sealed in words, if not in the hearts of both.

It was signed and sealed to all intents in the soul of poor Daljarroch, who of course felt himself in the seventh heaven, treading on air, and with whom time seemed to be standing still; while to Lady Augusta, it seemed that she could not be mistress of the situation, and that it was all a peculiar, if not a repellant dream!

‘Bless you, my darling!’ said he, after a pause, pressing his lips to her smooth white forehead, on which the thick dark hair grew downward in a ‘widow’s peak;’ ‘to-morrow I shall write to mother, and get her consent and blessing.’

He did not see the curl on the lovely lips at this simple remark; and Augusta, who came of a race that in the days of yore had been truly ‘high of heart and bloody of hand,’ as she thought of his mother—*his* mother, with her wonderful caps and appalling shawls—and of her *consent* being deemed necessary, laughed, but silently, not at the loving simplicity of the man, but with the scorn that filled her whole heart. Yet it was really too absurd for consideration.

‘Nothing can separate us now, darling!’ said he.

'Your mother may,' thought Augusta, with one of her peculiar smiles.

Duncan's phrase was an awkward one; but perhaps he meant the congratulations of his widowed mother, whom he tenderly loved—a douce, plain old Scottish matron, who had been the confidante of his love affair, but had never ceased to warn him of the vanity of such hopes and wishes as to win the daughter of an earl.

The ringing of the bell for luncheon put a prosaic end to an interview that, to say the truth, was very prosaic in itself.

'Was this love?' thought Lady Augusta, as Duncan, his heart in a tumult, led her from the gorgeous conservatory; 'surely not!'

She had, of course, read and heard and *guessed* a vast deal of what love might be; but here had been a formal proposal, an acceptance, and she was a *fiancée*, with a two-hundred-guinea ring on her engaged finger, and love left quite out of the compact, so far as she was concerned!

Her unconcealed coldness—her hand never stole into his, and her eye never brightened or sought his—gave Duncan curious misgivings; but he could only hope that all this would change in time, and that in time, too, she would love him as dearly as he loved herself.

The congratulations of her own family were curious. With the earl her acceptance of Duncan took the form of stately thanks and formal gratitude for a favour conferred; while her cousin, the hussar, could scarcely restrain a sneer.

'So—so! Is this the Prince Charming of your young girl's dream?' he asked, the moment he got her alone. 'My sweet cousin, are you mad?'

'Silence, Sidney!' she exclaimed.

'By Jove!' and he pirouetted about, twirling his bandolined moustache, clinking his spurs, and laughing, till he saw how her dark eyes sparkled with anger. 'He's got a most un-English name, any way!'

'Oh, Augusta—Augusta!' cried the impulsive little Auriel, as she clung to her sister's neck in laughter, and in tears; 'can it be that you are actually to marry that quiet and grave Captain Daljarroch?'

'Yes,' said Augusta, with an impatient sigh. 'It seems as wild, as strange, and unreal as anything that could have happened. Affianced, and to him! I can scarcely believe my senses; but here is his ring, and loosely indeed it seems to fit my finger!'

'But a better, nobler, or more genuine gentleman, Augusta, I cannot conceive!' exclaimed the generous younger sister.

'Perhaps; but then you are not to be married to him.'

'Tell me,' said Auriel, seating herself upon a velvet tabouret, and laying her head on the knee of Augusta, one of whose arms she drew round her neck—'tell me, how did it all come about?'

'As other affairs of the kind, I suppose.'

'But *how*?'

'Papa is in terrible difficulties, as you know well enough; Daljarroch has plenty of money, made in—in—by his father. Papa wished me to say "yes." I have said *yes*; so it is settled, and that is all about it.'

'Oh, Augusta, what a lovely diamond! It is quite equal to any among the Menteith diamonds.'

'And its presence here will save them from figuring in some Bond Street window.'

'But you love him, Augusta, don't you?' asked the girl, earnestly.

'I don't dislike him, Auriel.'

'Is that all?'

'All!'

'Ah me!' thought Auriel sadly, as she hung her fair head. Was she thinking of Charlie Oliphant, or Sidney St. John? We wonder which.

'It is of course, by money, what is deemed an excellent match, I suppose; but what will society say of it?'

'I thank heaven, dearest Augusta, that you don't love any-one else !' exclaimed Auriel.

'Why, little silly ?'

'Because your "excellent match" might have a most melancholy end.'

'Do *you* mean to marry for love ?'

'Yes—or——'

'Or what ?' asked Augusta, as her white hand caressed the other's golden-brown hair.

'Or not marry at all.'

Augusta laughed, and to Auriel it seemed that she really laughed naturally.

On returning to barracks, Daljarroch sought the solitude of his room—avoiding even Charlie in his desire to be alone—alone, that he might abandon himself to day-dreams, con over, react the scene in the conservatory, and realise the great and unspeakable joy of his heart—the happiness that had come upon him !

But the arrival of his friend soon arrested his wanderings in dreamland ; for though but a few years his senior, they were inseparable chums.

'Congratulate me !' cried Duncan, springing off his bed, on which he had been lying smoking : 'I have succeeded—people generally do when they set their mind on anything, Charlie.'

'I hope they do,' said the latter, thinking of Auriel ; 'but what is up ?—you look quite radiant this evening, Duncan.'

'Only this, old fellow : I have asked and obtained the earl's permission to address Augusta ; and more than this, I have won herself !'

'The deuce you have ! from my inner heart I congratulate you, Duncan !' said Charlie, grasping his friend's hand, while his eyes sparkled and grew moist ; but he thought nevertheless, at the time, that money gave Daljarroch that courage which he, Oliphant, would never possess. 'Old man, you

have all my best and dearest wishes,' he added, wringing his comrade's hand again.

'Keep it dark from the depôt mess, however. I don't want the offhand congratulations of Tom, Dick, and Harry, and to hear the name of Augusta on every fellow's lip.'

'But the murder will out some time, Duncan.'

Charlie, full of his friend's certain success, and of the probable chances that success might perhaps afford himself, he scarcely knew how or why, in the future, made—as the adjutant said—'a mull' of the whole evening parade, and conducted himself somewhat like a madcap that night at mess; and after the cloth was removed, he performed with greater ardour and more brilliant execution than ever his favourite song, and a stirring one it is :

'When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green,
And every goose a swan, lad,
And every lass a queen ;
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away ;
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day !'

But an emotion of doubt came over him, as he sang the second verse slowly, with a pathos and power which, as well as its peculiar words, poor Duncan Daljarroch was fated to recall, ere he was a year older.

Charlie's own hopes inspired the thrill of the first verse ; his own *fears*, perhaps the second.

But 'the murder,' as Charlie called it, was out ere long, and the tidings of Duncan's good fortune reached even the Albany Highlanders some weeks after, then amid the winter rains, and under bleak and cloudy skies, on the march from Peshawur to Sealkote, when among other fashionable intelligence it was announced, in the usual parlance of such paragraphs, that 'A marriage had been arranged between Captain Duncan Daljarroch, etc., and Lady Augusta Menteith, eldest

daughter of the Earl of Abercairnie, etc., etc.' For his creditors' sake, or rather for his own, that noble lord had not been sorry to see the public announcement.

'By Jove !' exclaimed one of the mess, 'Duncan is making his innings ; better fun that than fighting the Afghans, eh ?'

'What a piece of fashionable gush !' laughed another. 'I always thought Duncan would be the last man to be caught in the meshes of matrimony—but by an earl's daughter ! We'll drink his jolly good health when the baggage comes up !'

'Wish it was my luck !' sighed the first, as he manipulated an obstinate Chinsurah cheroot.

'Will he bring her out here, and up country, I wonder ?'

'Not a bit of it. His father made a big pot of money ; so Duncan is safe to send in his papers, and cut the service now, so far as work is concerned.'

But eventually it proved that Duncan did neither.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GARDEN PARTY.

DUNCAN DALJARROCH had written to his mother, then residing somewhere in a pretty village near the Clyde, a letter, at the tenor of which, though full of filial affection, obedience, quiet, calm earnestness and joy, also with unmeasured love for herself, Augusta might have laughed, perhaps scornfully, at the idea of her marriage being a matter of consideration for a tradesman's widow, whose blessing thereon was asked. But the old lady's answer might have increased that angry emotion, had Lady Augusta seen it.

All knew the earl, she wrote, was poor now ; and in the matter of money, the marriage was little to boast of, as all that would be on her boy's side. The earl, moreover, she added, had ever been a hard, cold man to the poor, and had

a name as being even a worse Scotsman than many more who were lairds and lords, or rather no Scotsman at all. Of course his daughter, poor lassie, could not help this, or his other short-comings, which were manifold. 'Your father—worthy man!—at a pinch, helped old Dugald Brassey, who was in the button trade, with many a thousand pound; but I little thought that his son would be helping a bankrupt earl, for that is what your marriage will be, so far as he is concerned. Lady Augusta, I know, is fair, and beautiful as fair, for I have seen her; but oh, Duncan, she seems proud and cold! And great and grand, and far, far above us, though your marriage may be—and I give you my warmest and best blessing thereon—fears mingle with my prayers for your happiness and hers, as we old Scots bodies have instincts of the future for which we cannot account.'

'Poor dear old mother!' said Duncan, as he smiled and sighed; but he destroyed the letter, nevertheless, and it was the first time he had ever done so with one written by the same hand.

Duncan turned to the accounts, the drill and business of his depôt; but the force of circumstances was too strong for him; his hand was soon still; his brain was dreaming, and every thought was away from the present, and with Augusta. He was daily at Abercairnie now, when off duty; and his horse knew the way thither as well as the Laird of Dumbiedykes' pony did the path to Jeanie's cottage. *Pro temp.*, Charlie Oliphant was thrown on his own resources; but Duncan was a kind of link between him and Auriel, and thus daily they could hear of each other; and there was a great joy even in that—to Charlie at least.

At last came the wished-for 10th, with its garden-party. In his desire to see Auriel again and enjoy the charm of her society, Charlie had looked forward with intense anxiety to this event, and shrank with terror at the idea of rain, for if the weather proved inauspicious it might be indefinitely postponed; but when he was up by *reveille* on the 10th, the

silvery mist was floating away from the green summits of the beautiful Ochils, the Forth was rolling in golden light, and all gave token of a glorious summer day when he and Duncan rode merrily off at noon.

The garden-party on the beautiful lawn on the south-side of the stately old castle, where the mown and shaven turf of emerald green was smooth as a billiard-table, and shaded by beautiful elms and chestnuts, was like any other, save that there was no music. There were lawn-tennis, croquet, and promenading, or sitting in shady places on handsome rustic sofas, among *jardinières* and tubs of flowers, for those who chose; liveried servants in the Menteith livery—blue faced with yellow—moved noiselessly about from time to time, dispensing fruit, ices and champagne-cup, etc., among the groups of fashionable-looking and handsomely-dressed guests. Pretty girls in unexceptionable and tasteful costumes flitted to and fro, and the click of balls and mallets mingled with girlish laughter and the hum of well-bred voices.

Charlie Oliphant was left pretty well to shift for himself, though hampered by 'Cousin St. John,' and had eyes only for Auriel, in her charming summer *demi-toilette*, with the daintiest of blue velvet hats, with a white feather, suitable to her golden hair; but Captain Daljarroch, who was deemed of much more importance, was warmly welcomed by the earl, and presented to some of the chief guests whom the absence of all his choice friends in London as yet permitted him to entertain.

Among the former were Lord Drumsheugh, a vulgar little, beetle-browed man—a lord of Session—and his better-half, Mrs. Macfarlane, in a state of gew-gaws and flutter, like Mrs. Wadsett, who with her six daughters had been invited from that famous Spa, the Bridge of Allan; and other folks of local note not worth naming, but who seemed rather awed by their surroundings.

Under the new and soothing influence of a change in his monetary affairs, the earl was more suave and unbent than

usual, and listened with toleration and without contradiction to a brief political argument between the patriotic Daljarroch and Mr. Athol McCringer, M.P., who, as Lord Advocate, had long toadied to his party and mis-represented Scotland, and was chiefly famous as a friend of retrenchment, which meant the abolition of every necessary and useful office in the North, and the retention of every useless one in South Britain, and who voted millions for piers and palaces there, while opposing manfully the smallest grant to Scotland, even to the value of a bucket of lime for crumbling Holyrood.

His presentation to them, and such folks as them, over, Duncan bowed himself away, and sought his now privileged place by the side of the brilliant but undemonstrative Augusta, who was disposed to view her present guests with a quiet disdain, with which she infected her cousin St. John.

No two sisters were more unlike in disposition than Auriel and Augusta.

The latter we have shown to be cold and worldly; but the former was a creature of generous and joyous impulses—a lover of music and of nature. She possessed an ardent imagination, and when reading a fiction or witnessing a drama was apt to throw herself entirely into the story, to share in the sympathies excited, and clothe its characters with flesh and blood.

Thus the romance of her nature led her, young girl like, to con and brood over the love she knew Charlie Oliphant felt for her—a love in one 'so detrimentally situated,' as Augusta would have phrased it, that the earl would have scouted it with supreme disdain, and in many respects would have been warranted in doing so.

The human hand may be stayed by an effort of reason or common sense, but the emotions of the human mind can no more be controlled than the waves of the sea.

The prosaic garden-party, so far as Charlie was concerned, was only the longed-for means to an end; but the end left him in utter and, for one so enthusiastic, painful perplexity.

Auriel had contrived to croquet his ball to a hopeless distance among the shrubbery ; and after this, they deliberately and tacitly wandered apart from the gay groups studding the lawn, towards its border, where the air was laden with the rich fragrance of lilacs and sweetbriar, and the laburnum waved its golden bells in the balmy breeze, and where the dun deer came from their lair among the brown bracken and looked at them curiously over the wire-fences, while the birds sang sweetly overhead ; and to Charlie, never did the harmony of nature seem more delicious than on this summer afternoon by the side of Auriel.

What they had been saying, or on what topic they had been talking, he never could remember aught, save that they had become wonderfully earnest and confidential, till he found himself saying :

‘ Oh yes, Auriel—oh, do pardon me !’ he exclaimed, growing absolutely pale ; ‘ I mean Lady Auriel.’

‘ Never mind,’ said she, laughing at his embarrassment ; ‘ well ?’

‘ I am not acquisitive by nature, heaven knows ; but had it blessed me with a tenth of Daljarroch’s riches, I should be the happiest of men.’

‘ Perhaps not ; a fashionable military man has no end of wants. I have always heard that Britain’s defenders are somewhat of Sybarites at mess, and by no means content with frugal fare ; while Sidney tells me that he spends all his pay on boots and gloves alone.’

She probably misunderstood what the wish implied, or affected to do so ; and the sudden reference to her cousin was unfortunate so far as Charlie was concerned, especially in its spirit. So he sighed and became silent as they turned slowly towards the mansion. But he could not resist speaking of himself again, and in an explanatory tone, while striving to enlist her interest in himself and his dubious future.

‘ I have worked hard, Lady Auriel—you can’t think *how* hard,’ said he with a sigh, ‘ for the purpose of raising myself

in my profession, for it is my only inheritance. I have been crammed and crammed again and again, and have undergone mental vivisection in the torture-chamber at Sandhurst, enough to turn one's brain, and for what? To have the privilege of toiling like a galley-slave a few weeks hence in the Afghan passes, and perhaps finding a grave there.'

'Poor Mr. Oliphant! and what sort of questions do they ask you?'

'Oh!' replied Charlie, almost savagely, 'such as: "Was King Alfred making love to the neat-herd's wife when he let her cakes burn?"—or, "How many pints of beer did Queen Elizabeth take to her breakfast?"—"Who was old King Cole's godmother?"—or, "If soldiers take seventy-five steps a minute in slow marching, and a hundred and sixteen in quick marching, how far would a regiment march in three hours, the last half hour at a quick-march, reckoning each step at two feet six inches?" and so forth. Now, who could answer all that in a breath? No fellow could!'

'Not I, certainly,' said Lady Auriel, laughing at Charlie's handsome but flushed face; 'one would need to study all the books in the library here, I think, to know such things,' she added, as they found themselves on a terrace, where the tall French windows of the library stood invitingly open, and they passed in from the glare of the sunshine; but Charlie felt an awkward conviction that, as yet, the conversation had not taken, in any degree, that tender turn which he had hoped to lead it up to.

Close by one of the open windows stood a reading-desk, whereon lay a large open volume.

'An Ancient Peerage,' said Charlie, glancing at it. 'Oh, they are sure to go in for *that* sort of thing here!' he thought; but his heart leaped as Auriel said quietly:

'I was looking over the Oliphants of Aberdalgie: you are connected with them, are you not? At least, Captain Daljarroch said so.'

'I am their lineal descendant. The title is deemed dormant,

and I am too poor to move in such a matter when no estates can be secured.'

'I saw here,' said Auriel, 'that one Sir Charles Oliphant, in the days of Alexander III., married a Muriel Menteith of that Ilk. Odd, is it not?'

'Why?'

'It sounds so like—Auriel,' she said, with a little laugh.

How dared she say this? thought Charlie, trembling; to what was *she* leading up, by such an inference or deduction, and by a reference so remote? Showing too, even by the open volume before them, that in absence he occupied her thoughts! Was she only trifling with him? If so, it was cruel, and so unlike her; but his heart beat fast as he read, 'This Sir Charles, who married a daughter of Menteith, renounced any right which he had as overlord to the woods of Ochtertyre, the rights of which he made over to the monks of Inchmahome, *pro salute animæ suæ*,' etc.

'And Ochtertyre is yours now?' he said.

'My brother Ronald's title—Ronald, who is at Eton.'

A dire confusion now came upon Auriel. She felt conscious of a blunder—a terrible one, under all the circumstances. Her face grew very pale; her soft eyes dilated and drooped, as they shrank from returning the ardent, eager, and passionate gaze of Charlie, for both felt that Fate was at hand—that a crisis in both their lives was approaching; and more than all, poor Auriel felt that she had unwittingly precipitated it!

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARLIE'S PERPLEXITY.

'LADY AURIEL,' said Charlie, taking her gloved hand in his as his heart and his voice trembled together, 'God alone knows the delight—the joy I feel in being with you; but I would—I would that we had never, never met!'

'Why?' she asked, avoiding his passionate gaze, while the conviction of having made a mistake caused her to take refuge in, and adopt a tone of, coldness all unusual to her; but she was annoyed with herself.

Charlie thought how supremely beautiful the young girl looked at that moment; but with a beauty that was, as yet, immature, though purely thoroughbred.

'Can you ask me why?' said Charlie, in a still more broken voice, while she slowly withdrew her hand, and he clasped both his appealingly, and his heart throbbed with an emotion to which he knew not how to give utterance. Yet utterance came, and with point enough: 'Why? Because I love you, Auriel.'

'Do not, do not say this!' said she hastily, and with considerable emotion, while her face grew very pale.

'I must, I cannot help it; my heart would burst otherwise. I never loved before, dearest Auriel,' he continued, gathering courage, 'and I never shall again.'

'Do not, do not say this!' she urged again, with a strange calmness, and glancing hastily around her. 'I trust your nature does not forbid your loving twice, if you are unfortunate enough to—to love me,' she added, while her eyes filled with tears.

'I know the hopelessness, the presumption of such a passion, Lady Auriel,' said Charlie, somewhat recovering himself; 'but we have no control over such a passion as love. I can only ask your pardon for my rashness, and—and nothing more, for in a little time I shall be far, far away from you, and forgotten, it may be, as if I had never been.'

'Therein you wrong me; that may not be. You will ever have my esteem, my dearest regard, Mr. Oliphant; more I cannot say. I am not a free agent,' she said, in a low earnest voice, while tears trembled on her long, dark eyelashes. 'I thank you for the compliment you pay me, but we can never be more than friends. Oh, *do* let us be friends,' she continued, with her delicate fingers tightly interlaced, and her lashes

drooped almost despairingly over her dark blue eyes as she spoke ; ' and let us also forget this conversation. — Come, we shall be missed from the lawn.'

' One word—one question, ere we go !' implored Charlie.

' Well ?'

' I have, I know, no right to ask it, as difference of rank——'

' That makes no difference to me,' said she, calmly ; ' but—your question ?'

' You love another ?'

She was silent, and turned hastily.

' Pardon,' said Charlie, with clasped hands and entreating eyes, ' if I am rash, and do not leave me in anger ; I could bear anything but that.'

' I feel no anger, Mr. Oliphant, but only a great sorrow for you,' said she, with much sweetness of manner.

' Why should she feel sorrow ?' thought Charlie.

' You are engaged, perhaps ?' he ventured desperately, as he thought of Sidney St. John ; but ere she could reply, Mr. Athole McCringer, the M.P., and Lord Drumsheugh, in close dispute, with harsh and dissonant voices, ' anent' some point of law or politics, approached the library and compelled them to quit it. The terrace without had now many promenaders, and, hastily leaving him, Lady Auriel turned away towards the lawn, and his eyes and his heart followed her.

What a picture, he thought, the high-bred girl made in the shrubbery path, which was flecked with rays of sunlight, falling aslant between the branches of the deliciously fragrant pink and white hawthorn, the greenery around contrasting with her golden hair and white floating summer costume.

He followed her, but to resume the conversation where it had been left off was impossible, as she never gave him an opportunity of being alone with her for a moment till the close of the garden-party, from which he was one of the last guests who lingeringly withdrew, leaving Daljarroch with Lady Augusta ; and when he bade adieu to Lady Auriel, so calm and perfectly collected was her manner, that the most acute

observer would have failed to detect there was any secret between them ; for, though utterly devoid of the hauteur of manner possessed by Augusta, she had, in common with her, that air over all her actions which is the inheritance of pure descent, and which is evolved from the *sangre azur* alone—a grace devoid of languor, quiet and self-reliant, ‘imperial without imperiousness.’

Declining to ‘make an evening of it’ with St. John in his rooms, for the hussar scouted whist at crown points, and thought guinea ones alone ‘the thing,’ which proved beyond the means of Charlie, the latter rode homeward, sunk in thought and full of perplexity.

That anxiously-looked-for event, the garden-party, had come and gone, and much had not come of it, save the avowal—a pretty important one, however—that he loved her ; and there was relief and balm to his soul in that ! She knew *that* now, whatever might be the event ; the words could not be unsaid, and the old terms of friendly and apparently indifferent, though kindly, intercourse could never be resumed.

She had not absolutely declined or refused his love, but wished friendship in its stead ; yet that could never be now, for Charlie’s heart was one of those which must have all, or *nothing*. If she were engaged to that handsome *bête noir*, the hussar cousin, her manner might be accounted for ; otherwise, Charlie knew not what to think. How he cursed the interruption, but for which some light might have been thrown upon their future—a calculation into which, as yet, singular to say, the earl had not entered, for Charlie’s heart had fairly run away with his head.

Charlie Oliphant, we have said, unlike Duncan Daljarroch, was come of ‘good kith and kin ;’ the long, long line of the Lords Oliphant of Aberdalgie. It is not that one man’s race is not precisely as old as that of another, for the veriest beggar by the kerb has an inheritance of ancestry quite as old as the Emperor of China, and perhaps a trifle more sinless and less murderous ; but it is a weakness—a Scottish one certainly—

to have a pedigree ; and if that fortuitous adjunct, in default of the 'cursed lucre,' enabled him to stand better with Auriel Menteith—and the book that she had been consulting proved his known ancestry to be as old, if not older, than her own—it was one point gained.

'I know not how she is situated, Duncan, do you?' asked Charlie, as they had a late cigar together, when the latter came to his quarters.

'No, and I don't like to ask.'

'Why, old fellow?' said Oliphant. 'From what escaped her to-day, she seems entangled in some way,—not a *free agent*, she phrased it.'

'You have been coming it strong during your croquet, Master Charlie! Entangled—how?'

'That is precisely what I want to know. It must be some family compact—or secret!'

'I am not one of the family yet, Charlie,' said Daljarroch, with a bright smile rippling over his brown but handsome face.

'I can only wish that I knew more, or less; and wish, too, that I had never seen—never known her!'

'I can scarcely join you in that idea.'

'I wish to heaven,' exclaimed Charlie, 'that I had been where the regiment is now, with the Afreedi mountains in front.'

'That may come—nay, must come to pass, all in good time, Charlie,' said Daljarroch, laughingly, as he withdrew, remembering that so far as love was concerned, as well as rank, Charlie was some years his junior, and 'would, of course, get over it in time, somehow.'

Charlie sat long at his window, lost in thought, and threw the sash up to admit the breeze to fan his fevered temples.

The night was calm and lovely. It was a moonless one in summer, but in the glorious blue northern sky the stars were shining with a lustre almost equal to the moon. Away towards the Ochils, Orion's belt sparkled in the dome of heaven; at his feet, far down below the castle rock and ramparts, spread

far away in distance, sunk in silence and shadow, the valley of the Forth—the river, a silver snake, with all its marvellous windings through the most wonderful scenery—and amid an amphitheatre of mountains that form the barrier to the land of the Gael; that valley wherein, even the querulous and most unpatriotic Macculloch says oddly, are to be found 'the wealth, the splendour, the variety, the majesty of all which lies between earth and heaven!'

The wonderful beauty of the night and scenery were somewhat soothing and suggestive of hope to Charlie, for 'love can hope where reason would despair.' He smoked out his cigar, lighted another, and went on with his pondering.

It was pleasant, if most perplexing, to think over that interview with Lady Auriel—of what she had said and left unsaid; and yet it fretted him! What did she—what could she mean by it all? Only disparity of rank or position, it might be; better that than anything else.

'I had enough to bother and perplex me,' he thought, 'since my father followed the dear old mother to her grave, and since I came from Sandhurst. I have had hard study; hard cramming at all kinds of useless rubbish; hard drill, and harder work to make both ends meet—that beautiful problem beyond any in Euclid; and now, by Jove, I must add to my perplexities by falling regularly in love—and with an earl's daughter! How happy is Duncan! while I, poor devil, have only a smile—a fancied one, perhaps—a touch of the hand, nothing more—the memory of a voice to live on for days, and longer than days, with a heart that all the while hungers for Auriel!'

Would he really be looking on the masses of the Afghan mountains, ere the year was out, as now he looked on the Ochil range, the Hill of Alva, Dummyat, and the King's Seat?

And Auriel, whose bride might she be, even ere that time came to pass?—living, but not for him—smiling, loving, and in all her girlish loveliness, but for another! Then he thought of her sweet, sad song of the 'broken font of tears' the past

deemed dry ; and at the moment, in anticipation of the sorrowful time to come, tears seemed to gather—if we may use the phrase—in the tender and loving heart of the young fellow !

CHAPTER IX.

DUNCAN'S ENGAGEMENT.

DUNCAN DALJARROCH, even if inclined to have done so, could not, at this crisis, have quitted the regiment without losing his honour ; so the marriage arrangements were hurried on. This suited his own wishes, of course, and still more so those of the earl ; so meanwhile all had a busy time of it at the Castle of Abercairnie, Augusta especially.

Wedding gifts came pouring in, and each of these required a suitable acknowledgment. The selection of the trousseau required much time, and no small consideration. The earl had long and frequent consultations with Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett ; so had Duncan, who had no turn for business, and amid all his joy began to bless his stars that people did not get married every day ; and no one in the family circle seemed free from incessant interruption.

Auriel, feeling uncertain of gaining sympathy perhaps, did not take her sister into her confidence and tell her of Charlie's avowal in the library ; had she done so, Duncan Daljarroch might have been compelled, under pressure, to select another friend, and a groomsman, as he had requested Charlie to be.

Situated as Auriel was, reared and educated in an artificial manner as she had been, and scarcely knowing her own heart perhaps, it is difficult to know precisely how she viewed Charlie's 'presumption,' as the prouder Augusta would have deemed it ; but undoubtedly the girl felt flattered, pleased, and, ever and anon, dwelt with secret joy on the memory of that brief interview in the library, and the words that fell so brokenly, so breathlessly and tenderly, from the lips of the handsome young fellow.

Whether the heart of Lady Augusta had been untouched till this time—touched now it certainly did not seem to be—we shall not be impertinent enough to inquire or surmise, since it has little to do with her future history; but we rather think not, though she had, as we have said, shone in more than one London season. But times there were when Augusta, even at this stage of matters, seemed about to burst the fetters with which the earl had bound her, and conversations ensued between her and Auriel which would have crushed the heart of poor Duncan had he heard them; and sooth to say, her generally cold and often capricious mode of receiving his tenderness bewildered him, and threw his heart back upon himself.

‘Do treat him differently,’ urged Auriel, as she and her sister, after having their hair dressed for the night had dismissed their French maid, Fleurette, and sat for a time, each in a luxuriant easy-chair, and each in a rich soft *robe de chambre*, near the open window, where the warm air of a lovely summer night stole in laden with the perfume of the standard roses—white, creamy, yellow and pink, or crimson—that grew so luxuriantly in the garden without; ‘do treat him differently, Augusta—he is so good!’

‘If I loved him, I should find no difficulty in knowing how to treat him.’

‘If you loved him?’

‘I don’t want to love him!’ exclaimed the petulant beauty, pulling sharply her rings—the engagement-diamond among them—from her slender white fingers, and tossing them on the lace-covered toilet-table.

‘Oh, Augusta, this is terrible!’ exclaimed Auriel, as she turned from the contemplation of her own charming figure and white-slippered feet in a cheval-glass to gaze on her sister’s face; ‘beware—beware, dearest!’

‘Why should I beware—and of what?’ asked Augusta, imperiously.

‘Of your bearing to him: have you no heart?’

'I suppose,' said the other bitterly, with her proud and beautiful lip curling, 'I am not the first woman who has been drawn into a *mariage de convenance* (and shall not be the last), for want of money or something else.'

'In this spirit, Augusta,' said Auriel, her dark-blue eyes suffused with tears the while, 'you are not good enough for Duncan Daljarroch.'

'The tradesman's son—are you mad, Auriel?' her hazel eyes sparkling with anger.

'No, dearest Augusta ; but I mean what I say.'

'Then let him find someone better suited to himself, and papa find some one better suited to match with an earl's daughter.'

'Oh, Augusta !' urged the impetuous Auriel, 'no true woman can afford, twice in her life, to throw away the heart of such a man as this.'

'Romantic little goose !' exclaimed Augusta, kissing her, for she loved Auriel with an affection that was the most redeeming feature in her generally cold and haughty nature.

It is very probable that, pride of birth apart, Augusta might, of her own free will, have learned to love Duncan Daljarroch in time, and to appreciate the purity, goodness, and genuineness of his heart, and his love and supreme admiration for herself, had she not felt that she was made the victim, the sacrifice, as it were, of her calculating father's necessities ; and this her fiery spirit resented.

'He has his fancies, like other men, I suppose,' she said in this bitter spirit ; 'I am one. He can afford to marry a high-born and handsome pauper, when otherwise papa would have rung the bell and had him shown out.'

'Oh, Augusta, how can you speak thus !' persisted Auriel ; 'take care that, when it is too late, you do not lose the good opinion of one who loves and admires you.'

'And whose ready admiration is so well worth having !' said Augusta, with a sarcastic laugh.

'Be at least honest!' urged Auriel, nestling a tearful face in her sister's snowy neck.

'Honest! Is it honest to marry a man and live with him and detest him all my life, as I am sure I shall?'

And this was said but a few nights before her marriage!

But a short time now, and she would be Lady Augusta Daljarroch. Daljarroch! It had a peculiarity of sound in it, if the name had nothing better—money excepted, and there was plenty of that—but money won in trade!

Unaware of all this though he was, Duncan had a confused and perplexed emotion in his honest and affectionate heart. His proposal had been made and accepted, and the marriage hurried on—lest he should be ordered on foreign service was one plea therefor; but the details of his proposal and acceptance, and of his love-making, and Lady Augusta's responses thereto, were all so unlike everything that he had ever heard of, read of, or could have conceived, that at times he felt like one in a dream, from which he might awaken to find that no marriage was on the *tapis* at all!

Yet, envied by Charlie, he was now, of course a daily visitor, *l'ami du maison*, at Abercairnie, where, sooth to say, his intended did not give him, on one pretence or other, too much of her society, and when she did, received him in this fashion:

'I am looking different from what I usually do this morning, surely,' said she, with a proud and petulant smile, as she tossed aside a book, rose from his side and moved into the conservatory, as if his gaze of silent admiration in the presence of others bored her.

'You are looking as you ever do, my darling, beautiful!' said Duncan, in a low, mellow voice, as he drew her to him, and, unseen amid the masses of flowers and foliage, kissed her.

'Please—don't!' she exclaimed, growing, if possible, paler than usual.

'May I not kiss you?' asked Duncan, with some surprise,

in which annoyance was curiously mingled with amusement.

'What does a kiss mean?' she asked in turn, eyeing him defiantly.

'But that you are no coquette,' said he, taking one of her hands caressingly, and looking very much as if he would like to repeat the offence, 'I would say that it means a salute indicative of affection, and should be mutual between us,' he added laughingly, yet with a low and tender voice, as he bent over the beautiful but studiously averted face.

'I have heard there are kisses and kisses,' she said, 'but I don't know what that may mean.'

Duncan sighed, and dropped her hand.

'I have read, Augusta,' said he, 'that "kisses have been compared to grains of gold or silver found upon the surface of the ground—of no value in themselves, but precious as showing that a mine is near" !'

'A mine !'

'Of love and passion.'

'Oh, hush ! with this sort of thing—here comes Sidney.'

Duncan thought with impatience the latter was rather too much in the way, for ever since her engagement he hovered about Augusta, in a cousinly way, quite as much as he did about Auriel ; and now he came laughingly and loungingly from the garden, up the snow-white steps, that were glowing in the sunshine, and led into the conservatory, with his long hussar stride, and a cigar between his lips, and a mischievous smile on his handsome face, that seemed to say he knew he was 'spoiling sport,' but cared not what Daljarroch might think.

Till after the marriage, Charlie Oliphant was not without facilities for seeing Auriel—facilities that made his love grow deeper every day and hour. On more than one occasion had she kept three 'round dances' specially for him ; yet he had never found courage to resume the broken thread, the dropped link of that conversation which had been so inopport-

tunely interrupted in the library at Abercairnie. He remembered the question that remained unanswered, and the suggestion of Daljarroch, that he supposed her to be engaged, rankled in his mind, all the more so when, ever and anon, he found himself compelled to relinquish her to Sidney St. John, and leave her with that privileged and somewhat *insouciant* personage.

The earl and Augusta, and even St. John, were quite aware of the risk run by having 'a detrimental' at Abercairnie; thus Charlie, though *pro tem.* invited there as usual, never found himself precisely alone with Auriel, but was ever thwarted, he scarcely knew how.

Nearer and nearer drew the marriage-day of Augusta now; and if worthy Captain Daljarroch was perplexed by the indifference of his bride, he was more perplexed and pained by her reception of his mother, to whom he was devotedly attached, and who arrived betimes as a special guest at Abercairnie, where she was ushered into the drawing-room, wearing a bonnet somewhat out of the mode, and a flaming Stuart tartan shawl, 'in honour,' as she said, 'of the Albany Highlanders.'

She was a plain, motherly-looking, elderly woman, with light-grey eyes and silver hair, and features that beamed with kindness and goodness, if somewhat the reverse of patrician in contour: and she kissed her 'big laddie, Duncan,' as she called him, on both cheeks, with great fuss and effusiveness, and heedless of all who were present, accosting him in that old Scottish accent, which, like genuine old Scottish warmth, has long been banished from such drawing-rooms as those of Abercairnie Castle.

'My next kiss is for you, my darling Augusta,' she exclaimed; 'it is to be quite my *bong bouche!*'

Augusta shivered at the old lady's French, and frigidly tendered her ear rather than her beautiful cheek, while Sidney St. John focussed the group with his eye-glass.

'Peculiar old party!' he thought, and glanced with his

mischievous smile at Duncan, in whose handsome and open face there lurked an expression of secret pain, which passed away when the old earl, whose worst enemy could not accuse him of lack of perfect good-breeding, ignoring all peculiarities of manner and tone and lack of *ton*, as if he did not perceive them, welcomed her to Abercairnie with stately courtesy, if not with genuine warmth, and, with all the usual commonplace and well-bred inquiries about her health, her journey, and so forth, consigned her to the care of Auriel till luncheon-time; and again kissing her son, she withdrew, after making a considerable sensation—‘a regular breeze,’ as St. John thought—in the drawing-room circle, and leaving Augusta painfully sensible that she had spoken of her host as the ‘airl,’ and her sister as ‘Leddy Oriel.’

But Lord Drumsheugh, a senator of the College of Justice, spoke in precisely the same manner.

CHAPTER X.

WHICH TREATS OF SEVERAL THINGS.

THUNDERING in the great vestibule, the gong announced luncheon; and the family circle gathered from various quarters, the earl leading in Mrs. Daljarroch, and seating her by his side. She wore a widow's crimped cap of rather ample proportions for the present day, and of a fashion, as Augusta thought, unknown to Regent Street. In her rich black moiré and undoubtedly fine lace, the old lady looked well, if without style, and seemed somewhat abashed till the perfect suavity of the earl put her at her ease, and she ceased to twist her massive gold watch-guard nervously about her hands, and to seek incessantly the glance of her son, as if for countenance—a rather vain proceeding, as he had only eyes for his *fiancée*.

The latter seated herself next Mrs. Daljarroch, who sedu-

lously sought to learn to love her, and to make, as she thought, 'a fuss' with her; but both tasks proved very difficult with the cold and haughty Augusta, though the old lady, in her kindness of heart, had forcibly kissed her with great *empressement* while in the act of clasping round her slender white throat a jewelled necklet and pendant a princess might have worn, and she had brought a similar gift for Auriel.

But in spite of herself, Lady Augusta could not conceal her alternate listlessness and petulance, and a sense of being under supervision. Anon, she would remember that it was now the middle of June, and thoughts would come of the race-course at Ascot and the Guards' luncheon-tent, and of all who were *there*, while she was in 'the house of bondage,' that horrid Scotch place Abercairnie, and under such circumstances as these; for to this complexion have the Scottish people of title—never very patriotic at any period of history—come now.

The luxury of the luncheon—a veritable dinner, with rich *entrées* in silver dishes—the flowers, the fruit from the earl's pineries, the Wedgwood-ware, the ancient Venetian crystal, etc., were all nothing new to the widow of the wealthy manufacturer: though the general accessories at Abercairnie, the tall grim portraits of dead ancestors upon the walls, the lofty windows hung with rich draperies, and the liveried servants gliding noiselessly about, certainly impressed her, till she began to lose her timidity in the thoughts of her son's wealth and the benefits that wealth would confer on her host; and when the latter, plunging into politics with the somewhat servile and vulgar Mr. Athole McCringer, left her free to address Lady Augusta, Duncan listened nervously, for the good lady was apt to say much that were better left unsaid in such an atmosphere.

'And what is it you do not like about Abercairnie?' he heard Lady Augusta, with a slight elevation of her dark eyebrows, say in reply to some remark made by his mother.

'It is such a rambling place, with a terrible haunted look about it. In my bedroom there hangs a picture——'

'Ah—of Earl John, who was killed on the Rhine.'

'Well, the eyes of it follow me at every step, and make me shiver, as if— as if——'

'What, Mrs. Daljarroch?'

'Well, a grue comes over, as if someone was walking over my grave.'

'And you alive?'

'I mean the place where it is to be. You know our old Scotch fancy.'

Augusta only smiled, and glanced at her cousin. Duncan saw the glance, and it seemed plainly to say :

'A vulgar old woman, with her adages and aphorisms.'

'Why don't you call her "mother," Augusta?' he asked softly.

A thought of *her* mother, the late stately countess, a daughter of a long-titled house, only made Augusta smile disdainfully, without replying.

'With all its antiquity and size, its great rambling corridors and stairs up and down, Abercairnie scarcely boasts of a ghost, Mrs. Daljarroch. Our housekeeper has quite enough to do to keep all the servants in order, without having such an adjunct to scare them,' said Augusta, laughing, but not merrily.

'Aye, I dare say, Leddy Augusta, she will have enough to do with so many half-idle kimmers about her. When my poor dear Duncan, that is dead and gone, had his factory in the Gorbals, he had two thousand hands, all happy and contented people. No strikes were heard of then in the land, and no trades unions either. He kept them at work, and made his money by pluck—sheer pluck—and keeping his honest shoulder to the wheel. Well, as I was about to say——'

What Mrs. Daljarroch was about to say, or how what she had said had any connection with Abercairnie, was not made

apparent, as she read an expression in Augusta's face that puzzled and confused her.

'Ah, yes!' she resumed, as if half communing with herself, and shaking the crimped lappets of her cap; 'my poor old Duncan—he *was* a man! What an eye he had of a morning, as he—the captain over two thousand men (my boy only commands a hundred, if so many)—went round his workshops! Nothing escaped him—a band off a wheel, or a wheel lacking oil; yet he was ever cheerful and kindly, and had a nod and a smile for one and all—and generous as a prince! Why, my dear, there were the Brothers Spreul, of the Turkey Blue Dye Works, worth a million of money: but for my man's aid, at a pinch, they had never succeeded as they did, and bought up half the county. And there was old Rasper, of the great Steel File Factory—you heard perhaps of Rasper——'

Again she paused and became confused, for the expression of hauteur had deepened nearly to disgust in the beautiful face of Augusta, whom the word 'Intolerable!' nearly escaped as she fanned herself; and as Duncan listened to his mother's garrulity, a dull and dreary expression stole into his fine face—such as one would not expect to see in that of the bridegroom of such a bride as was about to become his.

He contrived, however, to turn the current of a conversation which the haughty Augusta never forgot, and to which he did not recur after, as it would have been impossible to make the old lady understand why the great works at the Gorbals, and more than all her industrious old Duncan, should be forgotten and forbidden topics now—at least in Abercairnie. And when, at the suggestion of Auriel, who sorely missed the presence of Charlie Oliphant and his quiet, earnest admiration of herself even while, to all appearance, seeming mightily consoled by the conversation of her hussar cousin, who laughed at Mrs. Daljarroch as 'too awfully un-English;' when, we say, the ladies withdrew to the garden, Daljarroch did not feel relieved, as he was in terror of his mother—much as

he loved her—committing some sad *gaucherie* there ; and he listened with irritation to politics as discussed by the earl and the ex-Lord Advocate, for honest Duncan was inspired by a sense of nationality and patriotism, of which they were as totally destitute as of any of the finer feelings of human nature.

The former quizzed Duncan unmercifully for having subscribed handsomely towards a Stirling monument to the patriot-king, Robert Bruce, as ‘being absurd and behind the age ;’ while, on the strength perhaps of the coming matrimonial ‘event,’ his lordship had sent a sum towards one to Lady Godiva in some part of England.

‘When you settle down, you must go into the House of Commons, Daljarroch,’ said the earl ; ‘but you must first get rid of a lot of your Scotch nonsense about patriotism, love of country, Burns, Scott, and all that sort of thing—it won’t do nowadays ; and practical men don’t see it.’

‘If I went into Parliament, my lord,’ said Duncan, ‘I would cease to become my own master.’

‘How ? Have you no ambition ?’

‘Yes ; but not to become public property—a jackdaw for every penny daily to peck at, all the more so if I studied the interests of my constituents, and preferred local to imperial interests, thus courting the sneers of the unpatriotic and the suggestions of every fool, while vainly seeking to do my duty as a Scottish member of the House should.’

‘Nonsense—nonsense !’ said the earl ; ‘who cares now about depopulation in the Highlands, or desolation, as some folks call it, while the shootings let well ? or who cares whether Scottish wants, as they are called—harbours of refuge, coast defences, and general matters of internal government—are attended to or neglected ? or how the revenue is expended, so long as it is on grand and imperial objects ? In the Upper House, where you know I have a permanent seat as Lord Brigham, no such ideas have ever occurred to *me*. I have always thought that if it is said that a certain Act of

Parliament shall *not* apply to Scotland, *that* is legislation enough for Scotland, and she requires nothing more ! To consider such matters, Daljarroch, would only be to waste your time and talents, for that which is nationality in England is mere petty provincialism in Scotland and Ireland.'

'In this spirit you will never see me in Parliament,' said Duncan, with something of sadness and anger in his tone.

'Scott has had much to do with fostering the provincialism of which I complain,' said the earl, 'and thus retarding progress.'

Mr. Athole McCringer, as an ex-Lord-Advocate, concurred in the earl's remarks and opinions to the fullest extent. Such had ever been his own *rôle* in the House, where, when he could get its ear—which was but seldom—such 'imperial' objects as the gravelling of Park Lane, and the shrubs by the Serpentine, and so forth, chiefly received his attention.

'With all deference to you, Captain Daljarroch,' he continued, in his slimy manner (he always had a great deference, by the way, to position, and still more to wealth), 'your views and arguments are as antiquated as those of Lieutenant Lismahago in his political dispute with Matthew Bramble.'

'And never were sounder views advanced than those which Smollett puts into the mouth of the eccentric Scottish lieutenant !' exclaimed Daljarroch.

'I am glad that you admit he was eccentric !' said the earl, with a laugh that grated on the ear of the honest, earnest, and well-meaning captain, who was a profound lover of his native country and all pertaining thereto.

Thus, when Mr. McCringer made a grotesque grimace, and put his hands to his ears, when the notes of a bagpipe were heard, as MacAlpine, the family piper—an appendage merely kept for show, as we have said elsewhere—began to play in the shrubbery, our Albany Highlander fairly lost his temper, and exclaimed :

'The pipes ! you sneer at them too, Mr. McCringer ; but of course, that is part and parcel of your sentiments and your

system—sneer at them, forgetting the part they have borne in nearly every battlefield that has been glorious to Scotland and to Britain ; forgetting, too, that they speak, as nothing else on earth can speak, to the heart of the Scot who is far away from home ; harsh, wild, barbarous, and uncouth as you may deem the instrument. If you had heard our pipes, as I have heard them many a time and oft, ringing in the hot still air of an Indian night, rousing perhaps the tiger in the jungle, or waking the deep echoes of the Himalayan forests, yet bringing tender associations of the distant land where home and kindred were—of the green hills and broomy glens, the blue waves climbing the dark-brown rocks, of the voices and faces of the loved, the lost, and the dead, “ old Scotland, one and all,” with what is now, and what has been—had you heard them, I say, as I have done, when the sky above was fiery as molten brass, and the heat was such that your sword-blade grew hot in the sunshine, you would not act thus, and to me, of all men !

Mr. McCringer thought of Daljarroch's great wealth, deferred thereto, and smiled a feeble, deprecatory smile.

‘ I have heard a story of a Breton regiment, which was quartered, I know not where, but in Flanders, I think,’ resumed Daljarroch, while colouring at his recent impetuosity : ‘ it was in a miasmatic district, where the men perished fast of fever and ague. The hospital wards were full, and daily matters grew worse, as the *mal-du-pays* now seized upon all, till their colonel, the Comte de Sainte Malo, procured a couple of itinerant Breton bagpipers to play beneath the barrack windows. The sound of the pipes and the national airs they played proved miraculous ! The sick men dragged themselves from their pallets, stretching forth their hands, and uttering feeble cheers, while not a few wept, as their native villages and their father's homes, amid the woods of the Menez mountains, and by the banks of the Loire, rose before them in fancy. In almost every case health was rapidly re-established ; and the Comte de Sainte Malo retained the

pipers, so that at a certain hour daily the familiar strains of their native instrument might amuse his soldiers, thus affording a relief for their overflowing feelings, and soothe the effects of the aching *mal-du-pays*. And yet, sir, the Breton pipe is a poor affair when compared to the great war-pipe of Albyn. I do not envy you, or such as you, your sentiments, Mr. McCringer,' said Duncan, loftily, as he gave his dark moustache a vicious twirl; 'what says Scott, the man you sneer at?

“ Breathes there the man with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned,
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign strand!”

And home I hope this has come to every man who has the honour to wear her Majesty's uniform! I have a just pride in my country, sir, as I have in my regiment, and we are proud to be called the Duke of Albany's Highlanders—all the more proud that we take our *national* title from a royal race, whose swords were never in the scabbard when Scotland required them, and who never shunned the battle when it came. In truth, Mr. McCringer, I believe in the massy national fabric of which Scottish saints and Scottish heroes were the founders, and which you, and such as you, would sap, undermine, and destroy.'

And Duncan, with a flushed cheek, after this peroration, withdrew to join the ladies, having only the unpleasant conviction that his words had been wasted on his hearers, who had not an atom of sympathy with his tastes and views on any subject whatever.

With all his purity, honesty, and enthusiasm, Daljarroch was sorry—half-ashamed of allowing his naturally good temper to be ruffled by a person he despised, but whose sentiments, or rather utter lack of sentiment, the earl indorsed; but he speedily forgot the petty annoyance in the society of Augusta, as he wandered with her through the

beautiful shrubberies. She wore a garden-hat, coquettishly tied over her magnificent dark hair, with Mrs. Daljarroch's splendid necklet sparkling still around her neck ; while Auriel, to whom Duncan felt grateful therefor, drew the old lady apart, to leave the lovers—if they were indeed a *pair*—alone—alone to their joy, as she hoped, for in three days now they were to be united.

Mrs. Daljarroch certainly thought the love-making of her son and Lady Augusta very cold, and very strange ! It was so different from her early experience, when she and 'her Duncan' wandered hand in hand by wooded Gilmore Hill and the banks of the Kelvin, or took a Sunday trip 'down the water,' to Gourock or Dunoon ; and the day of ease from toil amid the din of hammers and the whir of wheels seemed indeed a day of joy ; and some remark which she made, laughingly, to this effect, drew forth a quiet but caustic rejoinder from Augusta, the tone and tenor of which the old lady totally failed to perceive, though Duncan did.

He blushed deeply, painfully, like a schoolgirl, rather than the great stout soldierly fellow he was.

'Augusta,' said he, as he drew his *fiancée* aside, 'do bear with my mother's—my mother's——'

'Eccentricities?' suggested Augusta, with curling lip.

'Her shortcomings—the errors of age and old-fashioned days,' he added gently, almost beseechingly.

'Well, Captain Daljarroch——'

'*Captain* Daljarroch !' he exclaimed, reproachfully.

'Well—Duncan,' said she, with lips that smiled, though her beautiful eyes did not.

'Why not say Duncan, dear ? in three days I shall be to you, what you are already to me—all the world, Augusta—all the world !' said he, in a low voice, with lips that quivered with the tenderest emotion.

'I cannot yet awhile,' replied the cold and imperious beauty, unwilling to show that he *was* beginning to influence her, and have some hold upon her mind, if not yet upon her

heart ; 'it sounds so strange to me. Only remember this——'

'My darling—oh, my darling ! anything you please.'

'Well—it is to obey me, till the hour comes for me—for me——'

'What?'

'To vow to honour and obey you?'

'*Love*, honour, and obey.'

'Yes—yes, I know all that ; and I will keep my word, as no wife does, you know,' she added, with her first attempt to be playful.

She spoke in apparent jest, yet there came a time when Duncan was to recall it with no emotions of pleasure.

CHAPTER XI.

'BENEDICK THE MARRIED MAN.'

WE do not propose to give a lengthy detail of the wedding ; the *Morning Post* did that at the time.

It took place in St. Paul's at Edinburgh, as it did not suit the earl's exchequer just then to have it either at Westminster or St. George's, Hanover Square, either of which he would much have preferred ; for though his father had more than once been Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, as founded by John Knox, his lordship had long since turned his back on that road to heaven, as a vulgar and provincial one. He was in all things a consistent modern peer of Scotland to the back-bone. The beauty of the bride, and the wealth and rank of the whole party—for money gives rank nowadays—drew a brilliant crowd to admire and inspect ; and seldom has the light through the radiated cross of the great eastern window shone upon a handsomer pair than those who knelt before the Scottish Episcopal bishop on that auspicious day ; and old Mrs. Daljarroch, accustomed only to the ministration in a

little Scotch parochial kirk, was terribly awed and impressed by her ritualistic surroundings.

Like his groomsman, Charlie Oliphant, Duncan wore his uniform doublet, Stuart tartan trews and jewelled dirk ; and as he always boasted himself a Scot 'out and out,' even the brooch that clasped his shoulder-plaid was studded with pearls from the Burn of Cluny, and topazes and amethysts from Cairngorm. He had not an Oriental gem about him, though his wealth could have procured him the best in the world ; and he stood there, the pride of his mother's heart, though, sooth to say, even at that important time, the drooping eye of Augusta was offended by the old lady's costume.

Her widow's dress was of the richest black satin ; but over it she wore a shawl of many startling colours, with an expensive bonnet of fearful and wonderful construction, crowned with many flowers of a kind unknown to Nature, but donned in honour of the day.

Those who knew the bride best could perceive, amid her apparently perfect composure and haughty placidity, an under-current of coldness and disdain in the pale but glorious face, which the Brussels lace veil partly shaded ; while the clear, splendid dark eyes of Daljarroch were radiant with love and joy, as the last words of the nuptial benediction fell from the lips of the bishop, and he led his bride—his *wife*—from the altar-rail.

Next to being a bride herself, it is said that every young lady likes to figure as a bridesmaid ; but in the case of Auriel it had a curious and peculiar charm, for her devoted admirer, as in her heart she knew him to be, Charlie Oliphant, was groomsman, and it was impossible for her, perhaps, and it certainly was impossible for him, not to dream of what might yet be in their own case ; and during the service, her sweet and dark blue eyes had lowered under his glance, with an expression that made his heart beat wildly, for she looked then as lovely as her sister, though different in the brightness of her fair-haired beauty,

In this age of belladonna, pearl powder, paint, and rouge, Charlie thought how fresh she looked, all natural as she was in the flush of young womanhood, her features just as the hand of God had fashioned them !

Auriel and five other bridesmaids, all fair and high-born girls (except Miss McCringer, the M.P.'s daughter), were in uniform costume from the best *modistes*, and wore locketts, the gift of Duncan, bearing the monogram of his bride in diamonds and pearls on one side, and her arms, the three buckles of Menteith *or* within a *bordure gules*, engraved on the other.

Armorial bearings poor Duncan had none, for he was the first of his family who had not been a son of toil, and yet in his mother's eyes he seemed a prince amid all who were there.

Sidney St. John, attired accurately in morning costume, saw much in the marriage that he thought 'un-English,' especially the family piper in his tartans perched in the rumble of the earl's carriage ; but he envied Charlie's popularity with the ladies, especially with the bridesmaids, who were delighted with him as a groomsman, and Auriel absolutely blushed with pride and pleasure. He looked so perfectly a soldier and gentleman—like one who had all that ease and grace which the most perfect training alone gives ; able to bear his part in the social duties of the most refined civilisation without embarrassment to others.

But the earl's usually colourless cheek reddened with annoyance when Mrs. Daljarroch, to whom he courteously gave his arm after giving the bride away, remarked in an audible whisper that 'the best-man looked quite *distangy*—a veritable Donus !'

The bridesmaids thought Charlie looked *distingué* indeed, though they all knew his pocket was an empty one.

Amid all the brilliance of her son's alliance, poor old Mrs. Daljarroch felt like one in a dream, from which she must awaken to find herself elsewhere, though some of the realities

were startling enough. The bearing of the bride chilled and alarmed her, inspiring strange instincts and doubts whether his marriage would be so happy as her humble one had been ; thus, when she kissed the passive bride as they passed into the sacristy to sign the marriage-register, she was startled to find her cold cheek wet with tears.

Tears—and on her marriage morning !

Still more was the old lady startled when she drew back from the effusive cluster of bridesmaids that crushed about Augusta and embraced her, to hear some remarks made by the *insouciant* and certainly handsome cousin, Mr. St. John.

‘Well, sir,’ she overheard Mr. McCringer whisper, in his unpleasant tone and with his slimy manner, ‘don’t you wish that you stood in Captain Daljarroch’s place to-day—lucky fellow that he is?’

‘Why do you think so?’ asked Sidney, colouring with manifest annoyance.

‘Because you so evidently admire the bride.’

‘What reason have you for thinking that I do so more than all who are here?’

‘I have been regarding you for some time,’ replied the lawyer, with something of his cross-questioning look, ‘and have not seen your eyes wander once from her face.’

‘And you deem Daljarroch lucky?’ said the other uneasily or evasively, stroking his moustache.

‘Undoubtedly ! he is young, rich—blest with a lovely and well-born bride ! What more could man desire ?’

‘The love of the bride, perhaps,’ replied the hussar, resuming all his habitual *insouciance*, as he lounged away with a glance in his eye that Mrs. Daljarroch never forgot ; and at that moment she felt that she hated him for the doubts he seemed to have of Augusta, though she was not without them herself.

Like his mother, Duncan felt as in a dream, but a happy one, as he came forth with his bride from the western door-

way into a blaze of sunshine, and handed her into the carriage amid a cheer from the bystanders, for the tartan and the Highland uniform are always popular with the people.

The old butler raised his hand in signal, and the *cortège* started for a fashionable hotel, where the marriage breakfast awaited the party.

Remembering the noisy fun, the speeches and songs of her own marriage-day, when her old Duncan was the foreman of those works of which he died the master and sole proprietor, Mrs. Daljarroch was astonished at the well-bred and apparent tameness of the whole repast, and was not sorry when, ere it was over, the bride and her attendants withdrew, the former to reappear in her travelling-dress of violet velvet—a colour that well became her style of beauty—but looking, if possible, paler and more statuesque than ever.

Then the carriage came to the door, and the street-boys began to shout, in defiance of the irate butler and the police. At last the old white shoes and the rice were showered from the balcony and the door-steps on the departing pair, as Duncan drew up the windows and the carriage swept away, his last glance from them meeting the sweet, gentle, prayerful eyes of his old mother, whose heart seemed to follow him.

As the regiment was before the enemy, he had got only a fortnight’s leave of absence from the brigade dépôt duties, and was to return with his bride to Abercairnie Castle till they could arrange for the future—*pro tem.*, at least; and ‘where they hid their blushes,’ as the mess said, when drinking Daljarroch’s health that night, matters not to our story.

By others than the mess were the happiness and prosperity of Daljarroch and his bride drunk merrily; for he, open-handed and generous as a prince, had given a sumptuous repast to all the Albany and Argyleshire Highlanders of the brigade dépôt, with all their wives and little ones.

Full of joyous visions in which he could not help indulging, Charlie went back with the whole marriage party to a late dinner at Abercairnie, whither a special train conveyed it.

The protracted dinner, after the long and exciting day, was over at last at Abercairnie—the last of the oldest and most privileged friends had departed—carriage after carriage had rolled away down the stately avenue, yet Charlie the groomsman still lingered, irresolute and unwilling to leave, though his horse pawed at the *porte-cochère*, and he knew that he must ride back to Stirling Castle, where there was plenty of work cut out for him to do on the morrow, as he was the only officer with the *depôt* now.

Flushed to a certain extent with wine, excited by the peculiar events of the day, and his position or juxtaposition with Lady Auriel, Charlie felt somewhat desperate at the idea of parting from her without saying something, or extracting something from her—he scarcely knew what, or how, as in almost every instance he was baffled by the haunting Sidney St. John.

Under the eyes of the latter, though not within earshot, he begged a bud from her bouquet, and obtained it. A bud was not much to ask for—such requests had been made by others more than once; but something in Charlie's voice and manner, and something ardent and luminous in his eyes, caused her long lashes to droop, as she knew what was coming, and would have come, had the inevitable cousin not been near.

At last there was not the shadow of a pretence for remaining; he bent his head over her hand, bowed his farewell to St. John; as the earl had long since departed, and in a few minutes more was galloping home, when the rising sun was gilding the hill-tops, and the blackbirds and thrushes were beginning to sing their loudest in the hedgerows and the fine old trees that overshadowed the roadway.

The cool morning air was delicious, but Charlie was scarcely conscious of it as he galloped on—what a relief it was, that gallop!—on, and on, wondering what he had said, or left unsaid. Charlie, poor fellow! scarcely knew, his poor brain was in such a whirl. He had chiefly vague thoughts

of getting on the staff as acting sub-deputy-quartermaster-general, or something of that kind, and then proposing for Auriel in form !

The latter, warm, loving, and affectionate, had nearly forgotten all about Charlie and the rosebud—was thinking chiefly of her sister in the solitude of her bed-chamber.

With all Augusta's coldness of manner and pride of bearing, she had ever, of course, shown less to Auriel, who now for the first time missed her sorely—sorely as she had never done when Augusta went even for a protracted visit from home. Auriel felt that their home was a broken one now ; and that as Lady Augusta Daljarroch, her sister would never more be quite the Gussy of old ; so she had a good feminine 'cry' over it.

She wept all the more, as she felt a conviction that the haughty and beautiful Augusta had married one she deemed—with all his worth and excellence—infinately beneath her ; whom she did not love then, and might never love in the dubious, perhaps dark, dark days to come !

That night—or morning rather—and for many nights, the earl slept soundly and dreamlessly ; he was no longer in dread of what the butler's despatch-box might contain in the breakfast-room. Pale blue envelopes, containing blue paper accounts 'rendered' again and again, many with interest accumulating thereon, and underlined by 'the insolent dogs' in *red ink*.

He was no longer to endure the mysterious head-shakings and semi-complacent warnings of Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, writers to H.M. Signet ; no longer compelled to fight a life-and-death battle with that bugbear 'society.' A scrape from the pen of Duncan Daljarroch, 'the tradesman's son,' had wrought miracles, but not won gratitude at Abercairnle.

What Auriel really and secretly thought about Charlie Oliphant, neither her father (who had not troubled himself actively on the subject), nor Augusta, nor her beloved old gossiping nurse, Elsie MacAlpine, nor anyone else, precisely

knew ; she could as yet keep her own counsel, which was the only unwoman-like thing about her.

But she had first laughed, and looked provoked, and uttered something of grave rebuke, when Elsie, who had been a species of mother to her from childhood, caressed her, and hinted that she and Charlie 'were a winsome couple, and a happy couple, might be,' as it gave her intense annoyance to think that the domestics had already begun to canvas probabilities.

Charlie would fain have wished, had he known of it, that they had some more solid basis for their auguries.

He had only the conviction that he had begged for and obtained—what?—but a rosebud from her bouquet, to which she might, or might not, attach much importance ; and as he sat over his solitary breakfast in the old historic barrack-room, he was looking dreamily at it, instead of doing justice to the coffee and hot rolls, etc., which his smart soldier-servant, Donald McDonald, set before him ; and the 'assembly,' and 'officers' call' for parade had been blown in the echoing castle-square before he was tired of looking at the said bud, and had stored it reverently away in his desk.

Poor Charlie was decidedly in what the reverend essayist, A. K. H. Boyd, would call 'his vealy days' of loverhood ! Yet what delightful days they are, when in the flush of life, when all the world is young, 'and every lass a queen !'

But the excitement of the marriage fairly over, Charlie found a change awaiting him at Abercairnie Castle.

Twice he rode there, and called. On each occasion, 'the ladies were out riding, and his lordship was not at home.'

The earl had obtained all he wanted, and there was to be 'no more fooling now.'

Considering the close and friendly relation in which he stood to Daljarroch, he thought it strange that no special invitation of any kind came to him now ; it was evident that he was not wanted on one hand, or would be *de trop* on the other. His heart began to sink, and he looked eagerly forward

to the return of the married pair as the means of effecting some change in his favour, and as his sole chance of seeing more of Auriel, though to what end he scarcely knew.

But might not Duncan have 'gone over to the enemy now,' and be apt to see Charlie's philandering through Augusta's eyes, and take a noble and wealthy view of a penniless young sub.'s presumption? There was the rub!

If she were engaged, as Duncan had surmised, surely he must know *now*, thought Charlie. Anyway, the cousin assumed an air of proprietary when with her that was certainly very provoking!

CHAPTER XII.

'WORDS THAT BURN.'

THE brief, and we hope happy, fortnight's leave over, Duncan and his bride returned to Abercairnie, and in the intervals of his continued love-making he had to devote himself to parades and pipe-clay.

Mrs. Daljarroch, still a visitor at the castle, received her daughter-in-law with an affectionate effusiveness to which the proud and haughty beauty submitted without response; but she gave Duncan an eagle-like glance and an ill-concealed smile, while the old lady asked her if they 'had been as far as Bullong, where she had once parley-voed with her dear old Duncan.' And with all his profound love for his mother, Daljarroch began devoutly to wish that the old lady would begin to remember that she had some household cares to attend to at home; for though Auriel kindly did much to cloak her defects, she *was* sadly out of place at Abercairnie.

Of the importance of the earl's monetary troubles her son had, of course, a due suspicion, but was scarcely prepared for the exact amount of them, and was ashamed to tell her—the first secret he had ever concealed from her; and he was,

perhaps, ignorant how much they had furthered his suit with Lady Augusta.

He only knew now that he was incommoded—at times sorely incommoded, as he had never been before—by preventing Abercairnie from passing out of the earl's family; and in doing so, for himself and Lady Augusta, care and circumspection must be for a few years the order of the day—an order she was speedily prepared to resist.

Was she—was the earl—were they all grateful for all he had done?

Already poor Duncan dared not and cared not to consider, or 'take to avizandum,' as Mr. McCringer would have said.

The return of the wedded couple, so eagerly looked forward to by Charlie Oliphant, had now taken place; but the days began to glide monotonously away, and the lover found no advancement in his position with Auriel, or in his footing at Abercairnie, where Duncan spent every hour that he could spare from duty, and when engaged with the latter, seemed more *distract* and thoughtful than was his wont.

'I shall go near her no more,' said Charlie to himself impetuously, as he viciously sucked his cigar; and for three whole days his resolution remained unshaken. But on the fourth he found that Duncan had gone over to Abercairnie, leaving certain reports and returns unsigned; so to save him from a 'wiggling' at the hands of the colonel commanding, he galloped over to the castle with the documents, in the hope of seeing Auriel, only to be disappointed; as Duncan, while signing them in the library, thanking Charlie for his zeal and urging a glass of dry sherry and a biscuit, incidentally mentioned that Lady Augusta had a headache, and Lady Auriel had ridden up the glen with her cousin.

'As usual—always with that perfumed yahoo!' thought Charlie, as he returned at a rasping pace, again vowing that he 'would never go near her!' while in his heart he hungered for her smile, for the sound of her voice, a touch of her hand,

to feel her winning, pliant, and gentle form, as he had felt it in the waltz ; but to be alone, where no eye was upon them, and where he would have risked life itself for one kiss of her beautiful lip !

'Is she engaged to her cousin, do you think?' asked Charlie next evening, while at sunset dismissing the inlying picket, who were mustered in their tartan trews, Glengarries and greatcoats, with side-arms outside, and Duncan lingered for a moment in the castle-square ere returning to Abercairnie ; 'answer me, Duncan !' repeated Charlie, in an impetuous whisper.

'I cannot tell,' replied Duncan, shortening his reins with a preoccupied air.

'Has Lady Augusta not said anything to—to—dropped a hint of——'

'She has said nothing on the subject to me,' said Duncan curtly, and more sharply than was his manner ever before with anyone—more than all with Charlie, who felt his cheek colour, while a reproachful expression stole into his eye ; but he merely said, 'It is strange, Daljarroch.'

'Not at all strange. She is extremely reticent on family matters, and to me there seems to be some—some entanglement, I know not what or how. I only know *this*, dear Charlie : don't think about the girl at all !'

'Why?'

'It is all moonshine in the water. My advice to you is to join the regiment as soon as you can, and—and I shall not be long after you.'

Duncan's changed bearing was a riddle to Charlie, who said, after a pause :

'Have—a weed—something has crossed you, old fellow.'

'Thanks, Charlie. Ever since the days when Horace asked of Mæcenas how it came to pass that no one was satisfied with the position in which the gods had placed him, discontent has been the lot of humanity.'

'Of military humanity,' said Charlie, trying to laugh.

'And of married humanity, I begin to fear,' muttered Duncan inaudibly, under his moustache.

'What?' asked Charlie, inquiringly.

'I was only saying,' replied the other, evasively, 'that the lesson of life is the bitterest task a man learns. Ta, ta;' and he rode off.

'What the deuce *is* up with Duncan to-night?' thought Charlie; 'this doesn't seem a rosy condition for a man to be in, ere the honeymoon is over! And then there is that advice about Auriel. What *can* it mean?' he added reflectively, as he lighted another cigar and watched Duncan leave the fortress (which he, Charlie, could not quit, being subaltern of the day), and, riding down the castle-hill, disappear near the great turreted house called Argyle's Lodging; 'but with your wealth and bride, so beautiful and so highly born, surely you are to be envied, or the deuce is in it!'

However, could Charlie have accompanied Daljarroch that evening to Lady Augusta's boudoir, or her dressing-room, he might have had grave doubts of how much his brother officer was to be 'envied.'

The night was advanced, when Duncan, leaving the earl, St. John, and some others in the smoking-room, joined Augusta in her dressing-closet, where Fleurette had just coiled deftly up the silky masses of her beautiful dark hair, and, pausing for a second or two on the threshold, Duncan thought what a charming picture she made just then—his wife, his own—his very own!

A maize-coloured *robe-de-chambre*, of some fine material trimmed with rich lace, became well her dark hair and eyes, and the general style of her beauty. Her small feet, daintily slippered, were placed on a velvet tabourette; and white as the new-fallen snow, her tapered arms and delicate hands came forth from the loose wide sleeves of her costume, in the light of a shaded lamp, by which she was reading close to her dressing-table, on which, reflected like her own charming figure in the great mirror, were a wealth of costly trifles,

jewels, and rings, cut-crystal bottles with gold stoppers, reposing in nests and boxes of blue velvet or white satin, while an abundance of fine lace seemed to abound, festooned over the mirror, and lining the table-cover and everything else.

She seemed unconscious of his presence, and of some commonplace utterances which he made about the heat, the beauty of the night, or so forth, and his lip quivered at the openly manifested indifference—already !

While he addressed her again, she heard not, or affected not to hear, his soft and affectionate tones ; but seemed to be—perhaps really was—absorbed in the columns of *The Court Journal*, among the approaching marriages in high life, where many girls that she knew and had met everywhere, were making alliances, which, when compared with her own—save in point of wealth—were most of them brilliant to such a degree, that her ready exasperation was roused by the perusal thereof, and she turned the page impetuously.

Then her eye fell on 'Fashionable Entertainments,' at the end of a long and unusually gay season—Holland House—Marlborough House—balls and receptions at Eaton Square, and Cromwell Road, and Queen's Gate—gaities to which Duncan's wealth and her own rank would have given her access as usual ; but for his military duties, which chained him to that odious village of Stirling, with the prospect of Afghanistan in the distance, and on no pretence could she separate from him *yet*, even for a time.

Petulantly she flung the paper from her, and asked him abruptly whether he could not exchange into the Guards—the Scots Guards, she added, knowing her husband's national proclivities.

'With the regiment in the field, certainly not,' said he ; 'moreover, I have no desire to leave the Albany Highlanders. You made me promise that I would not, dearest Augusta ; and pray let me keep my promise, as I can never—just now, at least—quit my regiment or the service.'

'Not at all ; your movements matter nothing to me.'

'Augusta ! Why this unkindness—this petulance of tone ? Where are you going ? May I go with you ?'

'No.'

'Why ?'

'Because I would rather be alone,' she replied, passing out into the garden to conceal the tears of wilfulness that came into her eyes ; but he followed her, saying :

'My darling Augusta, do not speak to me thus ! Do not be angry with me, wife—my own wife—for loving you better than existence itself ! I cannot cease to love you, even if—if you ceased to love me.'

She smiled one of her now peculiar and bitter smiles, and said, while still looking aside :

'I *am* your wife ; be satisfied with that fact.'

'And worth your weight in gold to me !'

'Precisely ! You are right to estimate my value thus,' said she, affecting to misunderstand him. 'Papa did so, to a shilling !'

And she turned from him to close the conversation.

There was no mistaking the import of this cruel speech, with the useless present, and the terrible, aimless and hopeless future it suggested.

Poor Duncan stood rooted to the spot, and gazed after her with sorrow—deep sorrow, that grew to anger as he saw her laughingly join her cousin St. John, who came with racquets and balls for lawn-tennis, for he feared that she had much more in common with this cousin, who was in great spirits, having made 'quite a pot of money' on the recent French Derby at Chantilly, and was master of all the *on dit* and details of West-end life, than he, Daljarroch, would ever be. And they met beside an ancient fountain, whence a stream of water issued from the mouth of a grotesquely-carved lion—a stream said to have been thirstily drunk by the English wounded and fugitives after the battle of Stirling in 1297—and lately choked with weeds and ivy ; but now, like many

other things at Abercairnie, renewed and renovated *since* Augusta's marriage, it threw up a stream of pure and sparkling water.

He saw it all now, as the scales began to fall from his eyes. For life he would be but the barely tolerated adjunct to the earl's bargain ; and there seemed a depth of degradation in the conviction, only equal to the depth of his sorrow, to find that she, after all—after all—was so utterly callous and indifferent to what he might suffer, *already !*

Hoping against hope, he thought he would woo her anew, and try to win her still, and that all might yet be well ; for Duncan was a great believer in the subtle power of love, and perhaps devotion might make her heart expand, as sunshine does the folded leaves of the rosebud.

Anon the new-formed hope began to fade, and he, cut to the soul, turned his back with something of a shudder upon the stately pile of Abercairnie, and rode off to join in a long and hard day's drill in the King's Park at Stirling, with a heavier heart than he ever thought to have in his broad and manly breast.

Yet he strove to give his brains, or what distress and mortification had left of them, to drilling the united depôt, in the loose and new formation, to fight the Afghans, Zulus, or anyone else, and in the confusion of his thoughts, 'loose enough' did Charlie and others think he handled the parade ; thus, when he wished for 'reinforcements,' he held his plumed bonnet on the point of his claymore, the sign that 'no enemy was in sight,' and made such right and left signals that all the skirmishers were clubbed and in utter confusion.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CARPET DANCE.

AFTER Duncan's return, Charlie Oliphant was certainly invited once or twice formally to Abercairnie Castle, and he

and Auriel—he particularly—were content with these occasional meetings ; but his assiduity awakened, or perhaps rather fixed, the suspicions of the earl.

The latter never for a moment believed that anything like a secret understanding, least of all an engagement, between the two subsisted ; but there was an unmistakable something he did not like. The sympathy of two young hearts he could not understand, nor did he care or require to do so.

To barter one daughter's hand for his own purposes had been imperatively necessary ; but it was equally necessary to see the other well, and if possible socially mated to one of good position—all the more so that, save his commission, he deemed Duncan had none.

'Auriel,' said he on one occasion, 'we go back to town when Parliament meets.'

'Of course, papa.'

'Till then—I wish you would not—I am provoked to have to speak of it——'

'Of what, papa?' she asked, with a flutter.

'I wish you would not encourage that flippant young fellow Oliphant of the Albany Highlanders.'

'Encourage him !' exclaimed Auriel, blushing, but evidently with annoyance. 'Oh, papa ! how can you say such a thing?'

'Well,' said the earl, nervously twitching the ribbon of his gold eyeglasses, 'he seems disposed to make what is called love to you, and such preposterous folly must be nipped in the bud—nipped in the bud, I say ! Have you asked him to your carpet-dance?'

'No, papa.'

Her white eyelids drooped as she replied.

'I am glad of that ; it will be a hint he is not wanted.'

'But he is coming, papa.'

'How—why?'

'Augusta finds him on our list, and—and she invited him.' She smoothed back her ruddy golden hair with impatience. The earl shrugged his shoulders angrily, and said :

‘I thought written invitations were scarcely necessary.’

Acting under the influence of these remarks, poor Auriel was nervously stiff and cold to Oliphant when next they met under her father’s pale-blue and observant eye—so cold that he was astounded, and went back to barracks in despair and anger, all the deeper that then he had not Duncan always at hand with whom to confer ; and, sooth to say, he found the latter, for many reasons, far from being a sympathetic friend just then.

The earl was puzzled what to think of Sidney St. John’s ‘dilly-dallying’ with Auriel, though monetary matters did not trouble him now.

‘Knowing, as the fellow must do,’ thought the earl, ‘*my* wishes in the matter, his indifference, unless acted for some mysterious purpose, is audacious !’

Could he be in love with Augusta, despite her marriage ? He once admired her immensely ; why not still ? Absurd—absurd—he dared not. Yet, that evening he had seen him seated by her side, fanning her delicately tinted cheek in a way which, however cousinly, his lordship did not like *now*.

Duncan disliked it still more.

In the anxiety and perturbation of his spirit, feeling that he saw too little of Auriel for his joy, and too much for his peace of mind, and feeling that he might as well

‘Love one particular star,
And think to wed it,’

Charlie had the sense to feel and know that matters would not go on much longer thus, and that a crisis for good or evil would be a relief ; dismissal by, or insult from the earl, whom he dared not to address as he would certainly have done had his purse been equal to his passion for Auriel ; a decided ‘snub’ from her, or an order to join the regiment in Afghanistan—the best thing that could befall him, as Duncan thought ; but a crisis was nearer at hand than he anticipated.

The London season was completely over, and of course no one at Abercainie thought of going back there perma-

nently, though the household had not left Mayfair. The grouse-shooting had begun with August, and on the 20th the blackcocks would be whirring upon the braes and muirs of Abercairnie.

The earl was no sportsman now—perhaps never had been much of one at any time—but a few friends had been invited ‘to knock over the birds;’ among them a baronet—Sir John Lennell of Lennell and that Ilk. And it was for these visitors, as much as for her own amusement, that Lady Augusta, who still acted as hostess, arranged a carpet-dance.

The earl was not without hopes that Sir John, who had admired both his daughters greatly during the last whole season spent in London, might pique Sidney St. John into activity; as for scaring away Charlie, he was too small a bird to be thought of—much, at all events.

Sir John was a man of good family—his baronetcy being one of 1625, where his ancestor, one of the first baronets of Nova Scotia, had been duly enfeoffed in certain lands in that island, as usual, with earth before the castle gate at Edinburgh.

He had a fine landed property in the pastoral and fertile Merse; he had a handsome mien, an elegant bearing, could always command a hearing in the House (his constituency was English), and every way he was a suitable *parti*; but was twice the age of Auriel, whom he was disposed to admire more than ever, now that the more brilliant Augusta was beyond his reach: and all the more so from the many opportunities afforded in the limited circle of a country mansion. And from the hour he arrived, his confirmed thought was like that of the Laird of Cockpen, ‘that at his table-head he thought she’d look well;’ and so far as he was concerned—though a keen sportsman—he was quite inclined to give both the grouse and blackcock a holiday.

Now the earl thought he would leave matters to take their course, as his only wish was to get back to Mayfair when the season opened. Like ‘old Q.,’ of immortal memory, he

'believed in London and in London only,' as he was won't to say ; his private troubles were over, and he could enjoy a drive in the parks without fear, and indulge the tendency to stertorous exercises after dinner.

The drawing-rooms were pretty well filled by those invited to the impromptu dance, and to whom we need not refer, as they have little to do with our story ; suffice it that among those present were Lord Drumsheugh, a coarse-looking little legal man, who would have been more at home within hearing of St. Giles's bell ; Mr. Athol McCringer, the M.P., with his frightened manner and suave tones of assent to whatever his betters said ; Mrs. and the Misses Thirlage, who were good-looking and accomplished girls, with an intense desire to please.

Augusta was a brilliant hostess, Sidney St. John an excellent master of the ceremonies ; and the 'Jeameses' in the resplendent Menteith livery, with calves and aiguillettes, under the orders of the 'most respectable-looking' old butler, were very efficient as purveyors of ices, fruit, Champagne-cup and Moselle, sparkling in iridescent glasses.

In the greeting and meeting of Auriel and Charlie Oliphant, even the watchful eyes of the earl, with his gold glasses perched on the bridge of his long thin nose, could detect nothing. Yet she gave him, shyly and coyly, one of the most delicious smiles that ever made a man's heart thrill and beat faster. That she had a sense of proprietary in him, she could not deny to herself. Oliphant had just come in hot haste from a court-martial, without having time to assume 'mufti ;' consequently he appeared in the good old-fashioned style, as before the days of the Crimea, in all the bravery of the royal tartan—his shoulder-plaid clasped by a magnificent brooch, having the Duke of Albany's crest and cypher (the gift of Daljarroch), a gold waist-belt and dirk, and with the trews setting off his shapely limbs ; and all the ladies, of course, thought he looked *so* handsome, for the costume of the Albany Highlanders is markedly different in some of its details from that of our other national corps.

Charlie's brother officers—a few subs at the depôt of the linked battalions—detected that some change had come over him lately, yet knew not what the cause was, save that he had some 'swell friends' in the neighbourhood; yet he was never quizzed about it, as he was just the sort of fellow whom even the most practical joker dared not attempt to 'draw,' 'sentry-box,' to 'make hay' in his quarters, or play any of the hundred and one pranks practised now by the snobs and youngsters of the post-pistol days, and when our future Marlboroughs and Wellingtons are fashioned by the school-master and cramming tutor.

On this afternoon the well-chosen costume of Augusta greatly enhanced her wonderful beauty, showing every curve of her matchless figure; a bouquet of tiny lilies of the valley nestled in the rich lace at her bosom, but she was without a single ornament. Fleurette, her maid, was a true Parisian, and knew precisely to the shade of a leaf what suited any complexion.

'Vain as she is,' thought Duncan, 'she certainly does not get up her piquant costumes for *me* !'

That morning he had suddenly detected his mother in tears in her own room, and most uncommunicative on the subject of her emotion. Some affront, difficult to explain, had been put upon her by Augusta—and her affectionate son thought this wanton and intolerable—for she declined to be present at the dance.

'What *is* wrong with our mater, Augusta?' he asked softly.

'How can I know?' said Augusta, giving a last look at herself in the swinging cheval mirror; 'indeed, the good lady is scarcely, as she says herself, *bong tong*.'

Duncan flushed to the temples at the imitation of his mother's French, and the sneer; but somehow, just then, Lady Augusta was in one of her pitiless moods.

'You must not adopt this tone and manner with reference to my mother, Augusta,' said he.

‘Why—how?’

‘Simply,’ continued Duncan, with his heart swelling, ‘it does not become you to her, this general bearing and insufferable hauteur. Consider her years, and—her position.’

‘Consider mine!’ responded the haughty beauty, and swept away down the staircase to the dining-room.

This staircase had a ghost, the only place in the old castle which had such a tenant; for there at times might be heard, ascending or descending, the sound of heavy footsteps, with jingling spurs and the clatter of a sword, jarring from step to step, though nothing was seen, and it was said to be the spirit of that Earl of Abercairnie who perished with the Duke of Hamilton in the famous ‘Unlawful Engagement.’

Down that stately staircase Duncan followed her, in no happy frame of mind, and paused for a moment to look around him. It was not that it spoke to him of wealth—he cared not for that—in all its details, but of rank and long descent. There hung massive bronze candelabra, touched here and there with gold, surmounted by the lymphads of the Menteiths; the ornate oak banisters wound up that broad staircase by successive flights, till the last ended in a dome filled in with painted glass—every pane the gorgeous coat armorial of some alliance; and all the walls were covered by trophied arms and tall grim portraits in the costumes of past ages—Menteiths of the days ere gilt spurs and sharp lances were exchanged for the two curses of Ercildoun, the sheepskin and the grey goose-quill. And he, Duncan Daljarroch, the absolute saviour of their house, knew not a man that he could reckon among *his* ancestry, though of course it was as old as any earl’s in all the land.

With the stern thoughts that filled his mind, Duncan’s handsomely cut lips seemed to curl inward and disappear; then the lower one quivered painfully as a deep sense of mortification and disappointment came fixedly over him: yet the months allotted to the honeymoon were far from being spent!

'There must be some prizes in the marriage lottery, I suppose,' thought he; 'but I begin to have my doubts already. Heaven help me, if I have not drawn one! But perhaps honeymooning is an exclusive absurdity, after all. I have read somewhere that let two people love each other as much as they may, they can have too much of each other's society before they achieve the habit of *l'égoïsme à deux*; and that widows and widowers never try a honeymoon. It may be so!'

And with a sigh Duncan entered the sun-lighted drawing-rooms, where the dance was progressing with great spirit. The influence of habit and of society are strong—so strong, that though he had to talk and smile, and join in petty nothings with an aching heart and a cloudy brain, he did so with success.

Several dances passed, yet Charlie, though he had engaged Augusta, had not approached her sister after his first entrance.

Occasionally in the intervals of the quadrilles, the sportsmen had much to say of the many braces of birds they had 'knocked over' that morning by Lanrick Mead and Cambusmore. Charlie had *not* been offered the use of a gun on the Abercairnie shootings; but somehow he never thought of that. He had a nobler bird in view than a grouse hen, or a cock of the wood; but as yet he knew nothing of the more dangerous rival now in the field, in the person of the worthy, handsome, and enterprising Sir John Lennell.

He had courage, ambition, energy, and all the fire, hope, and enthusiasm of youth; and as he looked upon Auriel in her brightness, he longed—oh how futilely, yet passionately he longed—to do something great, or grand, or noble—something that would win praise from her, and wrest admiration from her cold proud father; to enter the lists in the tournament of war and life; to show that he was one of the fiery old Oliphants of Aberdalgie, who rushed to battle with their motto '*A tout pour voir!*' upon their bearded mouths and iron shields; forgetting in his passionate enthusiasm that

this is the prosaic age of Martini-Henrys, paper collars, penny dailies, and torpedoes.

And Auriel, as she watched him furtively over or through her fan, felt how hard it was that she had no friend or gossip in whom to confide, young girl like, that among her many admirers she had one so romantic and winning. All those she had in London—those who had been at school with her—were now elsewhere, suddenly left behind, when papa so quickly migrated north, ere the season was well begun.

Sidney St. John was not among the circle—including Sir John Lennell—immediately surrounding Auriel. He stood with another young man apart in the deep bay of a window, casting from thence furtive glances alternately towards her and Augusta; and the *distract* air with which he listened and replied to the remarks of his friend soon became apparent enough to the latter.

Meanwhile Auriel, when not dancing, was flying hither and thither among the guests in a half-hoydenish way that the earl deemed 'bad form'—sooth to say, she was anxious to avoid the somewhat particular attention of Sir John Lennell (was it under Charlie's eye?)—and with her fair flower-like face, her masses of golden hair, and her dark eyes of violet-blue, her lovely smiles, and the parting of her fresh pink lips, with all the halo of youth and joy about her, she had a beauty all peculiarly her own.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RAY OF HOPE.

THERE was no want of good dance-music, though Abercairnie was rather remote for professional aid, as Lord Drumsheugh's daughters, and those of Mr. Athol McCringer, being, like most of their countrywomen, thoroughly good musicians, and finding themselves in society they were not

quite used to every day, made themselves useful, and played quite diligently and brilliantly, making every chord of the grand piano vibrate through the lofty dancing-room.

During an interval a Scottish song was suggested, and adopted promptly by Auriel. Charlie kept somewhat aloof from her, but a swift covert glance drew him to her side (but Sir John Lennell was already 'in position,' and ready to turn over the leaves); and she sang his favourite—that referred to in our first chapter—as it was one his mother had been wont to sing to him in infancy. It is little known now, but the first verse runs thus :

' My mother sang a plaintive song,
Which winter nights beguiled ;
And as its echo died along,
She wept, and yet she smiled.
I clasped my infant hands and crept
Close to her parent knee,
And then I'd weep, because she wept,
Yet wondered why 't might be.'

Mr. Athol McCringer and the senator applauded the old Scottish air as in duty bound, because an earl's daughter sang it ; though their own 'women-folk' sang only modern 'drawing-room agonies,' or wonderful German and fearful French songs, aught national being deemed 'bad form' at the west end of, not Auld, but New Reekie now.

Charlie knew she sang for him ; his heart was stirred. And drawing near her, he was looking down, when she looked suddenly *up*.

Perhaps it was that his hand, resting on the back of her music-stool, in close proximity with her soft shoulder, trembled, or that some subtle instinct made her look ; but, as their eyes met, she saw that his were full of earnestness, sadness, and delight, while he read in hers a half-pleading expression, as if saying, 'Do not say you love me, or seek to love me, because it were useless to do so.' But he now claimed her for a waltz, and away they went.

Duncan Daljarroch was not dancing—he was in no mood to do so, for his heart was heavy ; but Augusta danced, and

he looked with pride upon her grace and beauty, and ignoring her petulance, paid tender deference, as ever, to all her wishes. Yet he was beginning to deem marriage a fiction in which there were two hearts and two souls certainly, but they were not—as in his or her case—*one*.

As he watched her floating round with each successive partner, smiling and flushing, animated and gay, he thought:

‘In not caring for me, she may soon learn to care for another!’ and though not a jealous man in a general way, Duncan’s heart shrank appalled at the gloomy and disastrous perspective of the life that might be to come; and his very fears seemed to assume the form of words, as he heard Augusta and her cousin conversing on the other side of a huge majestic *jardinière* full of flowering plants, where they shared an ottoman, and did not perceive him.

‘How joyous you seem, Augusta,’ said Sidney in a *sotto voce*, as he toyed with her beautiful fan, opening and shutting it in a half-absent way.

‘Joyous—you think so? I was cloudy enough when I entered the room, Sidney.’

‘You have laughed merrily enough since.’

‘Have you yet to learn, or have your hussar experiences not told you, that women often laugh most gaily when their hearts are saddest?’

(‘Poor darling!’ thought Daljarroch; ‘she repents her petulance with me already!’)

‘I hope it is not so with you, *ma belle cousine*,’ said Sidney St. John, bending nearer her; ‘surely, when mated——’

She snatched her fan from him impatiently, and fanning herself vigorously, said in a low voice:

‘My marriage was a very odd one, Sidney!’

‘But odd marriages are the order of the day,’ said he, laughing quietly. ‘All the wrong folks get mated: they next find the right folks, and then there is the deuce, perhaps, to pay.’

‘Oh, fie!’

'Fact, though. But, anyway, we must remember where marriages are made.'

'Oh!' was the somewhat bitter whisper; 'mine was made in Abercairnie. The human heart, you know, may become in time a plaything.'

Sidney St. John, instead of looking concerned or distressed, merely stroked his dark silky moustache, and seemed half amused and wholly puzzled by his cousin's tone and manner; but he said in a tragicomic manner:

'Why, Augusta! at this time your heart should be full only of that love, the—the—faintest foreshadowing of which makes the heart to tremble at first.'

'Out of what novel did you cull *that*, for certainly it is never your own!' exclaimed Augusta, with a laugh that was apparently genuine.

'On what terms beyond the warrant of cousinship, are these two, if they dare to canvass *my* marriage thus?' thought Duncan, as with a dark expression in his eyes he walked softly away, lest he should hear more, and forget alike himself and the room full of happy guests.

Clever in the art of self-torment, black and bitter thoughts came thick and fast upon him now. What might be the end of all this? Would a day ever come when their names—*her* name—might be in the mouths of the wretched public, when the morning papers were placed on tens of thousands of breakfast-tables?

He stifled that which seldom, if ever, rose on his lips—an oath; and resolved that he would remove her from Abercairnie and all its influences at once. And in this fashion Duncan Daljarroch *enjoyed* the carpet-dance.

Meanwhile, at the other extremity of the room, how were Charlie and Auriel progressing?

The waltz was over, and a waltz in half-walking costume cost more exertion than one in a ball-dress. Palpitating and breathless, for it had been a rather protracted one, and one enjoyed to the utmost, she hung now on her partner's arm,

looking shyly, coyly upward into his eyes, while speaking nervously and quickly, saying she knew not what, and fanning herself with a circular fan composed of the snow-white plumage of some rare tropical bird.

‘Oh, what a charming gold locket!’ she exclaimed, seeing one dangling from Charlie’s chain; ‘and it is dated—10th of July!’

‘Yes.’

‘And what does it mean?’ she asked, as an expression of wonder came over her soft, childlike face.

‘That is my secret,’ said Charlie, in his softest tone.

‘I thought ladies alone were privileged to have secrets. Pardon my curiosity. May I open it?’

Without waiting for his permission, the nimble little fingers quickly opened it; and perhaps she expected to see a miniature there, but the contents puzzled her.

‘It is full of—ashes and leaves—leaves of what?’

‘The ashes and leaves of your rosebud.’

‘Given you——’

‘On Lady Augusta’s marriage-day.’

A lovely flush of colour swept over her soft face as she quickly reclosed the locket, and did *not* resume the arm of Charlie, who felt ‘in for it now,’ for this was the second time that anything approaching to such intimate relations had taken place between them.

Charlie suddenly became ardent, hopeful, and energetic, and under cover of a song which Augusta was singing, while the guests crowded near her, he whispered, while gazing rapturously into her earnest, animated, and at that moment singularly beautiful face:

‘Lady Auriel, could we steal into the conservatory for five minutes—even for one minute? I have something to tell you, something to ask, and the words seem to be eating my very heart away.’

She looked up at him with a shy and wondrously sweet glance, not unmixed with fear.

'Will you come—for five minutes—only five?' he entreated.

'Not for even one; we cannot without exciting observation,' she replied, growing very pale. 'But what have you to say that is so important—that cannot be said here?'

'Oh, Auriel—Lady Auriel!' his voice, his lips, and his heart trembled as he spoke, 'can you not imagine what I have to say? I want to—to speak to you.'

'But you are speaking now,' she replied, with one of her coy bright smiles.

'I have that to say which must be heard by you alone. I want to whisper in your ear—to touch your dear white hand—to——'

Charlie's voice became broken.

'Hush!' said she, while her heart beat fast, and her soft eyes drooped beneath the love and fire that burned in his; 'Sidney is looking this way.'

'And you will not come?'

'Say—cannot.'

'I thank you for the difference,' he replied; and while to those who might be watching them he seemed intent on the petals of a flower in a *jardinière*, he said, while furtively pressing her soft arm to his side: 'I meant but to tell you, Auriel, that if you would permit me to love you—to hope to win, when more worthy of you——'

He paused, and she made no response.

'I am poor, presumptuous, every way unworthy of you; but I can no more help loving you, than living!' By this time, the petals of more than one priceless flower had gone to fitters. 'Will you not speak?' he asked, in an imploring whisper.

'Oh, what would you have me to say?' she asked, trembling with agitation.

'Be frank with me.'

'I will be so,' said she, gathering courage, yet with downcast eyes, blushing cheeks, and heaving bosom. 'I like you

much—oh, very much—far better than anyone else I have ever met or known ; but—but——’

‘What, Auriel?’

‘Papa—you don’t know papa—his views—society——’

Her voice faltered and died away.

‘Our dance, I think, cousin,’ said the now rather sinister voice of St. John, as he lounged towards them.

‘Is it so? I had forgotten,’ said Auriel.

‘You will give me one more waltz ere I go?’ entreated Charlie.

‘Impossible ; my card is full.’

Charlie, who knew that it was not so, was about to withdraw with a half-frigid bow, when she suddenly, unseen by St. John, who was picking up and buttoning an obstinate glove, pencilled hurriedly on the back of the card :

‘Be at the Fairy Rock, near the north avenue, before dinner to-morrow, and——’

Veiled by a bow, Charlie Oliphant, who saw she had not time to complete the sentence, gave her a glance of profound love and gratitude, and passed into the throng, while she resigned herself to her cousin’s arm.

At that moment he felt victorious over everything. His heart had been apt to sink when he considered the details of the wealth and grandeur around him ; but his innate and honest pride—his independence of spirit—more than all, his blind love of Auriel, came always to his aid, and he felt that her love was his doom !

Never before had Auriel done that which she did to-day, and barely was it effected than she blushed scarlet at her own impulse and wished it undone, forgetting that ‘men (and women too) have done, under the temptation of love, things that the same persons would not have done for any earthly consideration.’

Then, apart from all the hollow mode of her uprearing, there was, to a girl of Lady Auriel’s temperament, a great hue of romance in having such a lover as Charlie Oliphant, a poor

young sub of 'high degree,' almost under orders for the seat of war. It had taken hold of the girl's imagination; and then, more than all, he was so handsome, so winning, and so devoted to herself!

At last their guests were gone, and she sought the silence of her own room, to bathe her hands and temples in eau de Cologne, and strive to think. Ere she could abandon herself to the luxury of this, what was her terror to find, that though the white silken cord of the engagement card was yet attached to her fan, the card itself was *gone*—had dropped off, or been quietly abstracted!—but abstracted by whom? Sidney? oh no; he never would dream of such a thing!

If simply lost, *who* might find it, and see the memorandum she had written—the assignation actually made, and by herself!

Shame, mortification, perplexity, and sorrow pervaded her heart by turns and all together. She might be prevented from keeping the appointment; and one might do so, who might only insult poor Charlie, and lead him to think that she mocked him.

It was a horrible dilemma!

She flew back to the dancing-room and searched every corner thereof; inspected every chair on which she sat; every place and corner in which she had stood; the corridors and great staircase—but in vain. Who could have it? Perhaps some one of the servants—who might not see, or seeing, not understand, what she had pencilled thereon.

She dreaded the eyes of all the circle at dinner—pleaded fatigue, and remained in her room. Never before had the poor little girl been in a state of such grievous perplexity.

'Where can it be? Who can have it?' she kept repeating to herself in agitated whispers, little thinking that at that precise moment it was in the pocket of him who had found it—her father, the Earl of Abercairnie!

The earl's debts were all cleared off, we have already said, and he was revelling in his luck; for though he had no pre-

cise religion of any kind, perhaps he had a kind of superstitious faith that he was cared for by something or somebody, and was 'pulled through' accordingly in some providential way.

Did he deserve it? He never thought to inquire.

Cold-hearted and selfish in his domestic relations, and dishonest to his country as a peer and landlord, he had ever loved crooked ways, and never felt quite himself when he was not pursuing them. In him a good lawyer was spoiled; and now in turning to use the card he had so inopportunely picked up, he felt on his proper track: instead of going gently, kindly, gravely, and authoritatively to his daughter, and begging or desiring that she would not meet Mr. Oliphant, he resolved on a dramatic but clumsy *coup*!

CHAPTER XV.

THE FAIRY ROCK.

WITH all his romantic love for Auriel, Charlie Oliphant had neither liking nor respect for the Earl of Abercairnie, but rather an emotion of antagonism. The notoriously selfish character of the latter, socially and politically; his more than cosmopolitanism; his utter want of nationality, in itself a crime in the estimation of a Scotsman of Charlie's character, made him a trifle reckless, perhaps, as to what view his lordship might take of the whole affair. And in this mood partly, or with such thoughts mingling—though he strove to stifle them—with affection and gratitude to Auriel, as the afternoon drew on, he rode towards the suddenly appointed trysting-place.

It seemed strange, indeed, that she should have made the appointment; though he knew, of course, that they had few opportunities for even a moment's privacy at Abercairnie.

What answer would she accord to his prayers? or what

secret complications or entanglement might she have to explain that would crush his hopes—wild and aspiring as they were—for ever?

The long day, after morning parade, seemed as if it would never pass; and Charlie had nervously watched every floating cloud, trembling lest it might be charged with rain, and prevent her coming to the appointed spot.

Charlie knew it well, and leaving his horse in a thicket of silver birches, he approached it long before the necessary time.

On a lonely part of the estate, where an unused gate rusted on its hinges, and, like the grotesquely carved pillars whence it hung, was half buried among tall weeds, nettles, and ferns, the Craig-nan-Heurich, or Rock of Fairies, stood on the green slope of a hollow that was overhung by stunted oaks and silver birches, the slender sprays of which quivered like those of the aspen in the gentlest breeze.

All around was utter solitude, save when the coo of a wood-pigeon was heard, or a hare shot past, or the woods rustled with that pleasant, half-liquid kind of sound when the boughs are well-covered with foliage and the leaves are still glossy and green. He had been there more than once with Auriel, but never alone; and she had then told him the legend of the rock as it had been told her many times by her old nurse, Elsie MacAlpin; for in Scotland every rood of land seems to have its story.

The Fairy Rock, a great mass of the trap or basaltic species peculiar to the district, and some twelve feet high, abutted on the green slope, and had in its face a narrow indentation, or kind of fissure, which at certain times, according to tradition, opened wide and revealed a spacious cavern in the bowels of the hills beyond; and of it there was told a weird tale not unlike one related of the vaults below the Castle of Elsinore, and by Scott in his 'Minstrelsy,' of heroes put under enchantment, and kept in durance by supernatural power—an idea familiar to the lore of many northern nations.

In the Fairy Rock a sorceress of Enrich had warriors concealed, whom she had lured hither and kept in uncounted numbers under spell asleep, till the great event for which their swords were wanted would come to pass. On St. John's night, centuries ago, a Menteith of Abercairnie, wandering that way, saw to his bewilderment the cavern *open*, and a vista of light stretching far away within it. Being a fearless man, he entered boldly. There lay the spell-bound Celtic warriors arrayed in full costume, but wearing arms of great antiquity—lurichs of steel rings, leaf-shaped swords, shields and helmets of iron, the latter adorned with double eagles' wings, outspread. Grim, long-bearded, and stern they looked, in a kind of lambent light that played around them as they lay in long rows on the bare earth, each with a hand on the hilt of his great claymore, ready for battle the moment the spell was dissolved.

In stature they were gigantic ; their lips compressed. Yet Menteith passed slowly on, till he came to a pillar of rock, whereon hung a great bronze war-trumpet, the use of which he at once divined ; and putting it to his lips, he blew a blast that seemed to rend the cave asunder.

Its echoes were repeated a thousandfold, as though from a vast space ; and in the glow of the supernatural light, ten thousand points of steel began to glitter in the distance, and amid the vast and ghostly uncertainties of the cavern.

The bearded warriors opened their great eyes, dim with the slumber of years ; on every hilt their grasp seemed to tighten ; and while terror began to paralyse Menteith, he blew a second blast, when they started to their bare knees, and half arose, and half unsheathed their swords.

They, impelled by a wild panic, the intruder failed to blow the third blast, which would have dissolved the spell ; and hurling from him the magic trumpet, he rushed forth from the cave, to find day breaking on the mountain-sides ; but as the chasm in the Craig-nan-Heurich closed, a roar of rage and anguish followed the fugitive, while a terrible voice cried :

'*A leabeaden's mir dh-fhag na thuir !*' (Coward, you have left us worse than you found us !)

And to this day the shepherd at night-fall occasionally hears the clash of arms and mail within the rock, and hurries away without once looking behind him, lest he may see the cave open, and behold that on which none may look and live !

Charlie never thought of the wild legend then ; he thought only of her who had related it to him ; and he listened not for the clash of the swords of the Feinne, but for the sound of her footsteps. The afternoon, one in the last days of August, was sultry ; the old castle of Abercairnle in the distance, and all its woods and shrubberies, were bright with the glorious sunshine, drowsy and still.

At that moment there was sunshine too in the heart of Charlie. He began to hope in earnest ! He thought again and again over the half sentence Auriel had written, ending with the conjunction 'and ——' What was to have followed it ? Conjectures were wild and endless.

The great north gate led merely to the hills, and had been, we have said, long disused ; but near it was a little postern, through which Auriel came suddenly, closing it carefully as she paused, and stood looking towards him, her sweet face suffused by a hue that showed she was blushing almost painfully, as Charlie's heart now beat wildly.

In her haste or preoccupation she had come gloveless ; thus her snowy hands and slender wrists were uncovered ; her wealth of golden hair was shaded by a plain but pretty garden-hat, and she wore a charming kind of demi-toilette, which we shall not attempt to describe, but which seemed so suitable to a sultry afternoon, and was all the more becoming to herself and her peculiar style of fair beauty. It was soft and delicate muslin, revealing the supple and rounded outlines of her slender-waisted and full-busted figure to artistic perfection, as the piquant hat did the beauty of her face.

And now, as he saw all the latter, and hurried towards her

with joy, ardour, and hope, there flashed on Charlie's mind the chilling and often-made surmise : To ask her to be his wife ; would it not be absurd ? To what end, then, did he seek her at all ? To ask her to wait would be cruel—and wait for what ? Till promotion, fame, glory came ? Charlie scarcely knew what. He only knew that he had the wild desire, the crave to win her love, and establish himself in her heart. That there might be aught selfish, perhaps, in this never occurred to him, for seldom is a lover a casuist.

He took her hand, but she did not permit him to retain it. She was painfully nervous and excited, half hysterical ; but less from a sense that she was committing a *faux pas* that would have horrified Augusta, than from a dread of the person, if such existed, into whose hands her card had fallen.

' Oh, Mr. Oliphant !' she began.

' Mr. Oliphant ?' said he, tenderly and reproachfully.

' Well—my card on which I wrote the name of this place has been lost, and I fear——'

' That someone may have found it ?'

' Yes ; and—and——'

' But it bore no name.'

' Yet there is my handwriting ; and anyone may come here, out of mere curiosity, at any moment.'

' A remote contingency. Oh, let us not think of it just now, but only of ourselves—of ourselves alone—Auriel, for so I must call you, if I am to talk to you at all.'

The long-lashed white lids drooped as he spoke, for the manner and, more than all, the voice of Charlie, when addressing her, took, unconsciously to himself, a tender, gentle and entreating tone. Chivalrously tender to all women, as every man who is brave, and good, and true should be, a new light seemed to fill his eyes as he bent over the bowed head, on the golden hair of which he longed to press his lips, even for a second, but dared not yet.

' I have come to tell you,' began Lady Auriel, not looking at him, but twisting and pressing her delicate hands together,

as if she spoke with pain and difficulty—‘to tell you that which I may not have the—the opportunity of saying elsewhere.’

‘Not that I have no hope,’ said Charlie, taking both her hands softly, tenderly within his own, tenderly, as if he feared they might melt away ; ‘you could not be so cruel as to desire me to meet you only to hear that. From the first day I knew you I have never been without the hope of winning your love. Have mercy on me, Auriel, if you mean to tell me that I have been utterly wrong and mad while indulging in this hope !’

She did not speak, but her lips and eyelashes quivered painfully. He whispered :

‘You know that I love you.’

‘Yes,’ said she, now looking him fully, earnestly, and gravely in the face ; ‘without that knowledge I had not come here.’

‘Auriel !’ Charlie was beginning in a voice of transport, but she withdrew her hands from his grasp.

‘Oh yes, Auriel, I love you !’ he said, in a low voice of concentrated pathos ; ‘and I will love you until the day I die. You are all my ideal of the creature I could ever love and that could make me happy. I know that, as a soldier, I have little more than my sword as an inheritance, as it was my father’s before me ; but my heart overpowers me, and, blind to all, even my own presumption, Auriel, I can only repeat that I love you.’

He clasped his hands, and there were tears in his dark hazel eyes as he spoke ; and tears now welled up in hers of violet-blue, and she, looking at him sorrowfully, lovingly he thought, while her breath came and went quickly, said :

‘Ah me ! it was to prevent all this I asked this meeting.’

‘I have a rival, then,’ said Charlie, in a broken tone. ‘After the avowal made, I may be pardoned this question—are you engaged to your cousin ?’

‘I shall never marry him openly, unless—unless, indeed——’

‘But are you engaged to him?’

There was no answer, but she patted the grass unconsciously and impatiently with her little foot.

‘Will you not tell me, that I may know what to think, or how to see my way?’

Still there was no answer. She bit her lovely nether lip, and her hot tears fell fast. A terror came over Charlie’s heart that she had been entangled, perhaps, into some form of marriage with her cousin; all that Duncan had hinted of ‘entanglements,’ and the half explanation made to him in the library, flashed upon his memory, and he said, in a choking voice:

‘Oh, Auriel, have pity—say what does all this mystery mean?’

She looked up, and opened her lips, for this ‘daughter of a hundred earls,’ of one-and-twenty Menteiths of that Ilk at all events, was as impulsive as any school-girl; but ere she could reply a sound of footsteps was heard, and she became alarmed.

‘Some one is coming! so leave me, Mr. Oliphant, and not compromise me by remaining,’ she half implored, and half commanded. ‘It was rash, foolish, unseemly of me to meet you thus! but leave me, for heaven’s sake! Good-bye, Charlie—dear Charlie!’

The sounds were inside the postern-gate, which Auriel had locked on the outside, and which someone was now trying angrily and impatiently to open.

Charlie wildly kissed both her hands, and rushing away towards the birchen grove where his horse stood, with its reins over a branch, he mounted, and had vanished in the wooded hollow ere Auriel opened the wooden wicket or postern, and found herself face to face with—the earl!

Unwilling to admit that he had found a clue which brought him there, or to admit that he would condescend to play the spy or eavesdropper, he veiled his, perhaps proper, indignation under his real surprise, to find Hero there, but no Leander.

'You here, Auriel ! and alone !' said he.

'As you see, papa,' she replied, recovering her composure.

'But alone?' he urged.

'Oh, papa, I am quite safe ! the house is in sight.'

'How came that door to be locked?'

'I must have done it inadvertently,' she replied calmly, which was the fortunate truth, as it thus precluded a scene which Charlie and she could never have forgotten ; but the earl's time was coming yet.

'There is the dressing-bell for dinner,' said he, with a stately bow, as she passed through the wicket, which he closed and locked. 'I shall have this door walled up ; it is useless.'

'Why, papa?'

'Because it seems as if the race of Titanias will never become an extinct species,' said the earl, with a covert sneer ; 'illusions and love for asses' heads will last till the end of time.'

'Papa, I do not understand you !' said Auriel, with some annoyance and discomposure of manner.

'I know, however, what I mean : my duty to myself and to you, Lady Auriel.'

He was right to put himself first, and Auriel knew by experience that when her name was prefixed by 'Lady,' that silence was the wisest course ; so she proceeded in silence to her room, to dress for dinner and the delectation of Sir John Lennell.

'Shall I ever see her again?' thought Charlie, 'or will all this be a memory—a memory and nothing more?'

It seemed so, especially when he heard a day or two after that the earl and his daughter had quitted Abercairnïe for London ; and Charlie still remained a prey to unexplained doubts of he knew not what, and could only think of 'that snob of a cousin mounting guard over her as usual !'

But we are anticipating.

CHAPTER XVI.

ANOTHER SUITOR.

THERE was a great deal of courtly stateliness observed invariably at Abercairnie Castle, as at Mayfair; and thus of course all sat down to dinner in strict evening costume. Desirous to please her father rather than anyone else, Auriel's toilette was now more than usually perfect, and so Sir John Lennell thought. Daljarroch had sometimes ventured to offend against these proprieties by appearing in a shooting-coat, to the dismay of the earl, who deemed such 'bad form' as only consonant with his origin.

Auriel, *distracted* during dinner, only longed to make her escape from table, and listened drearily to Mrs. Daljarroch prosing about a house her Duncan meant to take temporarily at the Bridge of Allan. Auriel was ignorant of how much or how little the earl knew of her meeting with Charlie, and still less what he suspected; his manner was suave to her, polite, and his face inscrutable as that of a Sphinx. She wondered the while what Charlie Oliphant might be thinking of *her*, and of the whole situation, for she had told him nothing—not even to hope, poor fellow!

Frequently during dinner Sir John Lennell displayed so much *empressement* of manner towards herself, that she felt certain of being involved in some new complications ere long: but if the baronet was in love, it did not seem to impair his appetite; and she was thankful when politics came on the tapis.

Sir John, as a Scotsman, was indignant at a recent accidental discovery which he made in his place as an English member for Muddle-Puddle Boro', and which made some noise at the time, that in an English Law Reform Bill, which by its title was supposed alone to refer 'to that part of Great Britain called England,' a clause had been daringly and surreptitiously introduced by the Attorney-General, placing *all*

Scotland under the jurisdiction of the English Courts ; and he was full of wrath at the pretended mistake, about which the Lord Advocate McCringer and the rest of 'the precious sixty' were totally indifferent.

Now the earl, who detested everything Scotch but his rents and the game by land and water, only laughed immoderately at his guest's indignation, and regretted that the discovery had been made till after the Bill had passed into law.

Under cover of this discussion, Mrs. Daljarroch glanced at Auriel, and they slipped away together, bowed out by Sidney St. John, who soon after betook himself to a cigar outside in the garden, where he swung himself in a hammock between two trees.

Even the servants withdrew now, on a hint from the earl, who on finding himself *tête-à-tête* with Sir John 'over the wine and walnuts,' bethought him of the object he had in view with regard to Auriel and Sidney, and to pique the latter, if he could do nothing more.

The hour and the very aspect of the room in which they were seated seemed to invite mutual confidence. It was spacious and sombre, with massive sideboards and cabinets of ebony, in the deep shelves of which richly chased plate and rarely cut crystal glittered. The walls were of a sea-green tint, and hung with several ancestral Lelys and Knellers, and some grim figures in armour by Tintoretto. It was lighted by wax candles in Venetian bronze sconces, which shed a soft light over the dining-table, with its wines and dessert ; while between the heavy brocaded draperies of the deeply embayed windows—each recessed four feet deep in the old castle wall—there stole in a steady ray of silver moonlight on the dark, polished oak floor.

If Auriel dreaded complications, they were nearer at hand than she suspected.

Sir John, though handsome in figure and graceful in mien and presence, was not a youthful lover, and neither was he a poor one.

Position, wealth, intercourse with society and the great world, gave him perfect confidence and assurance ; and thus, without doubt, hesitation, or timidity, in a few remarkably well-chosen sentences, he begged the earl's permission to address his youngest daughter as a suitor, throwing in, easily and judiciously, hints of the excellence of the settlements he could make, and even reminding the earl of the elegance of the Dower House at Lennell ; and the peer listened with the blandest of smiles, and something of pride mingling with avarice in the expression that twinkled in his old china-blue eyes.

Poor Auriel's blood might have run cold, her spirit would certainly have revolted, had she heard the legal coolness of the whole affair.

The earl set down his empty glass, and shook the hand of his intended son-in-law. Considering what he had discovered, knew, feared, and suspected, of an attachment elsewhere, the earl thought he could not further Sir John's suit too urgently. If Sidney St. John chose to be a dilatory ass, it was his own affair. Auriel's interests were not to be sacrificed for *his* folly.

'Success to you, Lennell !' said the earl, in a low and, for him, emotional voice, as he again shook the baronet's hand.

The earl's thin, diaphanous fingers seldom gave an honest or manly grip ; but he clasped Sir John's hand now, nearly as firmly as he had done that of Duncan Daljarroch, after the interview in the library, and when he began to see a way out of troubles.

'You wish me joy, then?' exclaimed the other.

'Wish you joy indeed !'

'I hope it may not be premature. However, I hope soon to report progress.'

'She is in the drawing-room, and probably alone.'

'Suppose I join her there?'

'As you choose. I hear her at the piano.'

But the earl knit his brows as he heard the *air*—it had an

unpleasant association in his mind ; but Sir John knew nothing of that, and bowed, smiled, and departed, on matrimonial views intent.

As he entered the drawing-room, a glance through its great space, amid a wilderness of tables covered with bijouterie and glass-shades, assured him that Auriel was alone, and seated at the piano in a kind of recess, where the light chiefly came from wax-candles in sconces of bronze and silver.

She did not hear him approach, and he drew softly near, admiring the while—for he was a great connoisseur in female beauty—the contour of her head and shoulders, the faultless delicacy of her neck, ears, and profile ; but he came—though he knew it not—at, perhaps, an awkward time.

She was singing a song in a low, soft, cooing voice, as if she sang it—as she certainly did, or intended—to herself alone. Why was she singing it ? The earl, who had knit his brow when he heard the air, would have voted it ‘vulgar, provincial Scotch—bad form,’ for he was as anti-national as ‘old Q.’ himself ; yet Auriel seemed to be dreamily giving her whole heart to the words :

‘ But they who trust to Fortune's smile
Hae mickle cause to fear ;
So blithe was she, but to beguile
Our young chevalier !
‘ Oh, Charlie is my darling,
My darling, my darling !
Oh, Charlie is my darling,
The young chevalier !’

Her head was on one side as she sang, and, with the last words, her voice died away with inexpressible sweetness.

She started on finding close by her side, and bending over her admiringly, Sir John Lennell, who apologised for disturbing her, and besought her to continue her song ; but Auriel, with a shade of annoyance in her soft face, steadily declined, and even closed the piano ; and after a very brief pause, while regarding her with the tenderness and passion her rare beauty and his own confidence were quite calculated to excite, Sir John proceeded at once ‘to open the trenches.’

‘I have something to say to you, Lady Auriel,’ he began, ‘which must be said, for the words are burning away my heart ; yet I have obtained your father’s permission to utter them, for I am no laggard in love, Lady Auriel.’

‘Love !’ repeated Auriel, in a faint voice, as a glimmering of the situation came before her, and she grew pale with annoyance.

‘I love *you*, Lady Auriel, dear Auriel !’ he said, with a tender stateliness of manner ; ‘and you are the first girl I have ever loved.’

‘Perhaps so,’ thought Auriel, ‘but certainly not the first woman, or what has he been doing all these years ?’

‘Will you be Lady Lennell, the mistress of my heart, Auriel, of my fortune, of my life, of all I have in the world ?’

She heard this somewhat stereotyped phrase with a most baffling air of self-possession, and withdrew a pace or two as he attempted to capture one of her hands.

‘This is very unexpected,’ said Auriel, with a somewhat faltering voice.

‘Do not say so, I pray you,’ he urged. ‘Surely my manner, my past tenderness, my very eyes—unless destitute of all expression—may have led you to anticipate this earnest declaration, this humble proposal !’

She was silent, but this abrupt and prosaic, if determined, love-making failed to disturb her, though she did fear annoyance in the future.

‘I am not a boy who does not know his own mind,’ he continued.

Auriel thought the baronet was not a boy, certainly ; but to a girl of less than twenty a man of forty seemed pretty close on the frontiers of fogiedom.

‘I thank you very much, Sir John, for the honour you do me, but—but—circumstanced as I am, what you wish is impossible.’

‘Do not say this, I implore you !’

‘I scarcely know you, Sir John ; nor do you know me.’

'I am premature, you think, Lady Auriel? We met last season in London, and though your memory of it may be slight, *you* have never been absent from my thoughts since then!' he added, with more real earnestness and tenderness than he had yet evinced. 'If you think me premature, and cannot love me all at once, or would wish time to do so, we could leave the marriage over for another season.'

Handsome though he was, Auriel shuddered just then at the idea of being engaged 'for a season to him;' and his persistence began to perplex if not provoke her.

'Please to end this, Sir John,' she urged; 'I am not free.'

'Not free! engaged already?' said the baronet, with unfeigned sorrow and surprise in his tone.

'I have not said so, and I beg that you will not think so,' replied Auriel, with some decision of manner.

'I have heard that your cousin——'

'No, no—I tell you no!'

'By what are you entangled?' asked Sir John, surprised by her manner, after the permission so frankly accorded by the earl.

'There is a family scheme, over which I have no control. I thank you from my heart, Sir John; but never let this subject be broached again.'

It certainly could not be recurred to just then, as Sidney St. John came lounging in, with his usual half-vacant, half-insouciant smile; and Sir John withdrew to rejoin the earl, who heard the result with considerable anger and impatience.

'Not free—not free?' he thought, pondering over what Sir John had told him. 'Was there some secret understanding between her and Oliphant? was there more in that appointment, made by *her* too—that half-baffled meeting, than he suspected?'

The earl felt in an angry and very unaristocratic frame of mind.

'And she has refused you?'

'Absolutely!'

‘The minx!’

‘She spoke of an entanglement—a family scheme——’

‘Stuff, Sir John! all art to conceal some prior attachment. I fear,’ said the earl, changing colour perceptibly, unnoticed by his guest. ‘But I have kept her too long here; to-morrow I shall start for town.’

‘And I for Lennell. Please give an order, Abercairn, to have my things in readiness.’

‘Join us in London after a time, and all may yet be well.’

‘I shall not fail, my lord. For the present I have been, perhaps, too precipitate.’

And the earl rang angrily for the butler, while his words and manner left Sir John in doubt and perplexity as to the precise reason why Auriel had declined his proposal. Anyway, there seemed a mystery, a secret somewhere, to which he had not then the clue.

Auriel was utterly indisposed to the sudden appearance of ‘this new figure which had been so abruptly painted on the family canvas.’ Her heart had been touched, and more than touched, by Charlie; her heart at that precise time was indeed full of him—fuller than she dared own to herself. Thus it seemed intolerable to have to undergo the solemn and deliberate wooing of the self-possessed baronet. And when she heard of the sudden start for London, a bitter little smile spread over her face; for she knew that she had but precipitated matters by the futile meeting at the Fairy Rock, and precipitated the separation between herself and poor Charlie, which Indian service was sure to bring about ere the winter came.

So Charlie was very much to Auriel already! Very much? Would he ever be anything more? Time, that tries all, and avenges all, alone could show,

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TYPICAL SCOTTISH PEER.

SIR JOHN LENNELL had taken his departure betimes next morning from Abercairnie, and the earl was busy writing letters in the library in the forenoon when Duncan entered, and found that his lordship looked unusually 'worried.'

'I found Augusta in tears this morning,' said he, laying aside his pen, and peering at Duncan through his gold *pincenez*; 'what is the meaning of it?'

Duncan was glad to hear that the haughty girl had been doing aught so womanly as to have a 'quiet cry' over anything; she was usually so cold, arrogant and apathetic now.

'Tears, my lord! I am quite at a loss to think why, unless she resents my scheme of having a quiet little villa near the Bridge of Allan, within a convenient distance of the garrison.'

'Surely—surely you get along in harness together?'

'The fault may be mine, my lord—nay, *is* mine, I doubt not; but somehow Augusta does not—does not——'

'What?' asked the earl, abruptly.

'Look up to me,' said Duncan, substituting that phrase for '*love* me.'

'Oh, you should kindle her ambition—fire her admiration—fan her pride. This Afghan war, even if you led the whole army, instead of being but a unit therein, will come to nothing; it is but a flash in the pan, as they would have said in my time. But go into Parliament, and take an active part in the politics of England.'

'And you are leaving us for London?' said Duncan, evasively.

'For town—yes,' replied the earl, snappishly, 'by the night train.'

'So soon!'

'Not a bit too soon, sir,' said the earl, loftily; 'I have much reason to be dissatisfied with some things here.'

‘Sorry to hear you say so.’

‘Lady Auriel has flatly refused Sir John Lennell.’

‘That will be rare news for Charlie ; only, I shall not tell him, and so fan futile hopes,’ thought Duncan.

‘Thus, I am dissatisfied with her ; and, pardon me for saying, but I am also disappointed in you.’

‘In me—how?’

‘Politically, I mean. I have set my heart upon your going into the House and making a position for yourself, as my daughter’s husband ; but you are without ambition, and have such odd, antiquated ideas about patriotism, Scottish interests, neglect of them, and all that kind of stuff ; while in some of your views, I blush to say it, you are quite a Radical—a veritable Communist !’

The earl spoke, for him, quite angrily. He thought Daljarroch an ungrateful dog for not attempting something Parliamentary, after *his* daughter had done him the honour of becoming his wife. True, Duncan had paid off all *his* debts and incumbrances ; but now, if he went to India and got killed right off, it might be the better for all parties. She might—nay, would certainly—with her jointure, marry again more suitably in her own ‘set.’

‘A Communist ! I do not understand,’ said Duncan, with a kind of sigh, as if he cared little what the earl thought of him now.

‘Well, consider your view of the game laws, for instance. You would, had you the power, give my farmers equal rights with *me* and my friends ; and thus there would soon be an end of everything that flies.’

‘But the game, especially when numerous, eats the crops.’

‘There you go ! All the better for the birds, I think.’

‘And after a butcherly battue it is sold frequently, and thus another rent is taken off the land at the expense of the tenants.’

‘Some of mine have ventured to hint of such things to me, but Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett always contrive to

find a flaw in the lease of such fellows, and we turn them off. When I asked one of these fellows how he liked living on his savings, what do you think he said ?

‘Don’t know.’

‘That it was more economical than letting me—*me* live on them. There was an insolent psalm-singing Scotch Communist !’

But Duncan continued his former theme :

‘And still more does the scanty corn-patch of the Highland farmer suffer in proportion, as the whole country there is but a vast game-preserve—the hunting-ground of the English idler and the denationalised owner of the soil. I have no patience, my lord, when I think of our local grievances and evils ; and one of the chief of them, I, as a soldier and an officer of a Highland regiment, deem the desolation of the Highland glens, and the unjust, selfish and short-sighted policy which has swept from the country a fine and hardy race of men who, as soldiers, were second to none in the world ; and it is only by what even Hill Burton terms an “iniquitous legal jugglery” that the so-called lords of the land acquired that which belonged to the people, and the power of exiling them. The land of Breadalbane furnished two thousand kilted soldiers in 1793. How many could respond to the drum there now ?’

‘I neither know nor care,’ said the earl, with downright anger in his tone—‘the fewer the better for the landlords ; but if this is not downright Communism, I don’t know what is ! To air such opinions in the House would only provoke utter derision—laughter.’

‘Very probably,’ replied Duncan, ‘for even the most simple legislation for Scotland is there stigmatised as a “Scotch invasion” and a misnomer ; therefore I shall never enter it.’

The earl surveyed Duncan through the glasses that were perched on his long aristocratic nose with a comical mixture of commiseration and disgust, and after a pause, asked :

‘What freak is this about your taking a house at such

an absurd place as the Bridge of Allan, when Abercairnie is open to you ?

But Duncan made an evasive reply. On that point he was inflexible. He had taken it for a reason and purpose of his own, and declined to avail himself any longer of the splendour and luxury of Abercairnie.

‘Does Lady Auriel approve of returning to London ere the season opens ?’ he asked, to change the subject.

‘Very probably not,’ said the earl, with the slightest approach to a sneer ; ‘but her views are nothing to me. Till it suits me, I will put five hundred miles between her and Stirling Castle—and the Channel next, if necessary. By the way,’ he added abruptly, ‘when do you expect the route ?’

‘Almost daily, my lord.’

‘If Augusta does not go out with you——’

‘She will bear the parting nobly, my lord, be assured of that. I do not doubt that her courage and noble birth will make her equal and superior to the occasion,’ replied Duncan, with something like a sob in his throat, though there was much of bitterness on his lip and a dangerous gleam in his eye as he bowed and withdrew.

The earl looked after him with one of his cold, haughty and inscrutable smiles.

‘He may repeat all I have just said to that fellow Oliphant if he chooses,’ he muttered ; ‘Auriel will be out of *his* way, at all events, for the future. He is, as Augusta has truly phrased it, a quiet and well-bred, but dangerous “detri-mental.”’

There was certainly not the monetary necessity for marrying off poor little Auriel that had existed for utilising Daljarroch’s ambitious love for Augusta. The earl only dreaded on one hand a *mésalliance*, for such he deemed it, with Charlie Oliphant ; and on the other, he had brought forward Sir John Lennell to pique Sidney St. John into some activity in the way of proposing ; but he had failed in both instances, and the noble lord was in high dudgeon.

Moreover, St. John had declined returning to London at that precise period, when everyone was out of town, and the brown parched foliage of the trees and shrubs in the parks was powdered white with August dust, and had coolly invited himself to abide with Daljarroch and Augusta for a few weeks longer, though the former did not want his company at that particular time.

This, too, was a source of pique, as the earl found him a species of useful aide-de-camp.

So he and Auriel were off by the late train for London that evening, and Charlie was left, as we have said a few pages back, a prey to unexplained doubts of he knew not what, after their interrupted meeting at the Fairy Rock. And so, day by day, Charlie could only dream over that face so delicately fair, the coils of golden hair, and the long-lashed lids of dark-blue eyes—lids that rose unconscious of a certain winning look all their own—and, more than all, her charming little tricks of manner, and the last lingering pressure of her tiny soft hand.

‘Oh, that potent word—money!’ he would mutter.

Bitterly he felt ‘that death in life, the days that are no more,’ when he rode, as if to torture himself, in the direction of Abercairnie, and saw many a spot with which her presence had been familiar; more than all, the place where he had last seen her, the Fairy Rock.

If it was a source of no satisfaction to Daljarroch that St. John was at the Bridge of Allan, it proved some certainly to Charlie, though he went there but seldom now, as he felt vaguely and unpleasantly that his once genial friend Duncan had become a sorely changed man.

He might never see Auriel again, but, whatever came to pass, he knew, and felt comfort in the conviction, that she never could forget him or the avowal he had made—the avowal no woman ever hears quite unmoved, or commits utterly to oblivion.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FAREWELL MESSAGE.

WITH all his love for Augusta, Duncan was now so far from being happy that he longed intensely for the coming of the route eastward, as the means of effecting some change ; but many startling events were to occur, ere 'her Majesty's will and pleasure' in that matter were announced.

All the pretty and affectionate ways by which he strove to flatter or to please her proved unavailing : in every instance he found his loving heart thrust back upon himself, and the society of Sidney St. John preferred ; for they had an endless variety of topics with which they were familiar, and fashionable tastes in common, while he was made to feel in many ways that he was only an adjunct to her matrimonial bargain, and almost vainly to hope that he might yet woo and win the love she had never affected to give him.

'Well,' thought he, 'I must "run with the hare and hunt with the hounds," as the saw has it ; but I can strike out some new line for myself, and follow it to the bitter end.'

In the vague hope that some little change might be effected by removing Augusta from the influence of her immediate local surroundings, he had declined the use of Abercainie Castle, and taken a handsome villa near the Bridge of Allan ; but nothing there pleased her capricious fancy, though so many thousand visitors there in the autumn make the place gay enough, and all the vicinity teems with beautiful and romantic drives. But the style of the visitors did not come up to her standard, and everything annoyed and irritated her, especially the everlasting German bands, clad in the undress uniforms of major-generals, playing Scottish airs to most excruciating time, and who were only routed when Sidney St. John's fox-terrier sat on its hind legs and howled like a mad thing.

But her chief source of annoyance was that Mrs. Daljarroch still lingered with them, and did not find herself '*de trop*,' as she would have phrased it ; for, sooth to say, the poor old lady, deeming that by marriage she had half lost her only son, and by Indian service would soon lose him entirely, remained by his side, though feeling acutely sensible that she was unwelcome to Augusta.

Moreover, she saw that Duncan was far from happy, and that Lady Augusta valued not his love apparently, deep, true, and strong though it was—such as falls not always to the lot of women ; and she knew that little scenes which were as nothing to the outer world, yet were dire tragedies to Duncan, were often occurring in that stately house beside the Allan.

Every day the dread of separation was before her, for Duncan, in his proud and stern sense of duty, would not have quitted his regiment in time of war to have been made a peer of Great Britain ; and his fond mother thought that as he grew older, he grew more like her 'first dear Duncan.' But, sooth to say, education and culture had made the Captain of Albany Highlanders very different in tone and bearing from the young mechanic who began life at a Glasgow forge, plying the fore-hammer with brawny arms bare, and wiping the sweat of toil from his temples, perhaps, by a tuft of greasy tow.

From Duncan, Charlie never heard aught of Lady Auriel now : the former shrank from the subject as if it were distasteful to him. They barely met, save upon parade ; and it seemed as if the pleasant days of their old goodfellowship were over and done with. Besides, much that did drop from Duncan at this time sounded strange to Charlie, especially from a newly-married man—about the youth of would-be suitors ; the evils of short acquaintance between married couples ; the fickleness of women ; the misery of early marriages ; of unions contracted before people knew what they were about ; the chances of nothing coming to anything ; putting one's neck in a noose, and so forth.

And Charlie listened with doubt and bewilderment ; all this could not apply to Duncan's own case. To whom, then, or to what contingency, did all these common stock terrible truths and uncertainties apply ?

'Illusions never last,' said Duncan, on one of these occasions when he was unusually gloomy ; 'those of married folks are more brief than any, perhaps.'

'But not in your case, Duncan ; for in Lady Augusta you must have found your ideal of all a man can love.'

'Would that I had, Charlie !'

'How ?' exclaimed his friend, with positive pain.

'Because the ideal never disappoints.'

'And the real ?'

'Too often does.'

'Poor Duncan ! has it come to this, and already too ?' thought Charlie.

'Perhaps Lady Augusta is weary of the Bridge of Allan,' he ventured to say, after a pause.

'Likely enough—I too am weary of it ; but what can I do ?'

'The earl and Lady Auriel are still in London ?'

'Yes ; and Sir John Lennell is there too.'

'What does this conjunction of names mean ?'

'Oh ! the amorous baronet, don't you know ?'

'Amorous ?'

'Yes ; he proposed for Auriel—but I did not intend to mention this.'

'And how will the matter end ?'

'I cannot tell you,' replied Duncan, who was now in his saddle, and rode away in his then bitter mood of mind, almost heedless of the stab he had unwillingly given Charlie—a stab all the more keen from the utter doubt in which he left him.

St. John, so long his bugbear, was here ; but now a new suitor, titled, winning, and wealthy, was at her feet elsewhere, and backed doubtless by all the influence of the earl, her father.

Charlie felt that it was cruel of Duncan thus to dispel the soft illusions in which he had been indulging and brooding fondly over, till the time should come when, amid the new and stirring scenes of a distant warfare, he might forget them, perhaps for ever.

In a frame of mind far from enviable, mingled rage and disappointment, jealousy and pique, Charlie returned slowly to his quarters in the castle, remembering the while, with a species of grim satisfaction, a recent notice in a paper that a detachment of the Albany Highlanders was soon about to proceed to the seat of war in the East. Would *this*, if she saw it, touch a chord in her heart, if she had one?

The moment he entered his room, a little packet on the table caught his eye. It was addressed to him in a lady's hand, which, though he knew it not, affected him strangely. He broke the seal, and from the envelope drew forth a little box, such as might contain a bracelet, and very probably it had done so.

There lay among some fine wool a tiny bouquet of wild flowers, blue-bells, forget-me-nots, and a tiny sprig of heather, but all withered and faded—and, what was this?

Could he believe his eyes?

A memorandum, pencilled by the hand of Auriel Menteith, as he could not doubt.

'Wild flowers from the Fairy Rock—tied with my own hair. Forgive my haste yesterday. Good-bye, and best wishes.'

Again and again he read it, standing as if spell-bound.

'Forgive her, for what? Her apparent coldness, no doubt.' That the flowers were from Craig-nan-Heurich, referred to their last unsatisfactory meeting and the untold secret.

And it was tied with her own hair, too! A great gust of mingled sorrow and joy welled up in Charlie's heart, which now underwent a keen revulsion of feeling—sorrow for separation, joy at the conviction that she had thought of him, and that he had even the withered flowers her hands had

touched and her own hair had bound ; and he kissed the tiny golden-tinted tress like floss silk, reverently as a pilgrim might the holiest relic, for, lover-like, Charlie indulged in all a lover's childish freaks and extravagances.

But an hour ago he had been thinking of casting away the ashes of the rosebud he wore in his locket, and giving the locket itself to his soldier-servant to bestow on whom he pleased ; and here was a tress of her beautiful hair, given unasked, to replace all that remained of her first pretty gift.

By her mention of 'yesterday,' she must have made up the packet on the day of her departure, and subsequent to their interrupted meeting.

'*Yesterday!* and how came the packet here only now?'

With an excitement of manner that utterly bewildered Donald Macdonald, his servant, he summoned that individual, who, in answer to a torrent of impetuous questions, standing rigid and erect at 'attention,' stated that the packet had been given to Elsie MacAlpin at the lodge of Abercairnie, Auriel's old nurse, who had never found the means of delivering it until to-day.

By a wave of his hand Charlie dismissed his informant, who wheeled round as if on a pivot, and left the room ; after which Charlie threw himself into an easy-chair, and abandoned himself to thoughts that, for a time, were all of happiness.

He thought he saw it all. In the generosity of her heart, the noble girl—noble in nature as in birth—felt that she owed him some reparation for the hopeless love she had inspired and won—a love this very act would serve to make the more enduring !

Then, of course, came doubt to tantalise him. In some burst of emotion concerning the untold secret—whatever it was—she had left this gift for transmission to him, but might *since* have bitterly repented doing so, and perchance have painfully blushed for it, perhaps while listening to the whispered utterances of Sir John Lennell ! for little Lady

Auriel seemed altogether a creature of swift and sudden impulses.

Unless she were in secret a heartless coquette, which Charlie never conceived, he knew that he must be something to her at least—something more than any other man in the world.

It was a delicious conviction !

He could not write, lest he might compromise her ; and somehow, he cared not to take his old friend Daljarroch into his confidence in this matter now.

A species of peace, that was not quite peace, fell upon Charlie's heart ; for this was his first real love, and it seemed to be accepted and requited too, if these small symbols had any meaning !

He was not, as a writer says, one who had 'recognised a goddess in every garrison Dulcinea, or erected a new altar, and called upon a new divinity, with every change of quarters. Deeply fastidious in all things, he had long ago created for himself an ideal endowed with exquisite purity, and with all gracious womanly softness, quickened with bright intelligence and wrapped in the bewitching mantle of that beauty in which his soul delighted.'

In Auriel Menteith he had found—or thought he found—all this ; and now he would be content to watch and wait the will of destiny ; and though he might never win her, he ardently hoped, with all a young soldier's glow of romance, to do something great or glorious for her sake and in her name, in the far-off land to which he was bound—something that might make her soft breast heave with pride, and her eyes to glisten, when men who knew him not spoke of him in her presence ; and he felt, like Claude Melnotte, that it was even sweet,

' If not to win, to be more worthy *thee!*'

This was the genuine spirit of loverlike chivalry. But alas ! chivalry and the deeds that were born of it can come

no more in this age of arms of precision, of Woolwich infants and torpedoes ; but poor Charlie never thought of that ; he only thought of the golden-haired Lady Auriel and of military glory, like the enthusiastic and heroic young fellow he was.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘UNTIL DEATH US DO PART.’

DUNCAN DALJARROCH and Lady Augusta did not lead exactly what is vulgarly called a ‘dog and cat life,’—that would have been bad in taste, at least ; but it was a life of high-bred indifference on the part of the latter, and of deep mortification on the part of the former, who strove to close his eyes to the fact that still she seemed insensible to all his devotion and generosity ; and at times the words of Barry Cornwall occurred to him :

‘Dost thou despise
A love like this? A lady should not scorn
One soul that loves her, howe'er lowly it be.
Love is an offering of the whole heart, madam,
A sacrifice of all that poor life hath ;
And he who gives his *all*, whate'er that be,
Gives greatly, and deserveth no one's scorn !’

Duncan was miserable, yet he would scarcely admit that he was so, even to his closely observant mother.

‘She is indeed beautiful,’ said the old lady one day, as she took her now moody son’s hand caressingly in hers, ‘but her heart is a hollow one.’

‘Do not say so, mother ; and be kind to her when I am gone, for that she will go with me to India I dare not expect, and she may yet want all the kindness you can give her. Beautiful she is indeed, but,’ he added with bitterness, ‘in her case I cannot say “a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.”’

‘I would tire of the loveliest face, even of hers, if it

brought—as I see it has done—sorrow upon you, my good and handsome son.'

'Don't say so, mother,' entreated Duncan; and the old lady withdrew as Augusta swept into the room, and something of a contemptuous smile wreathed her proud lip, as it always did when she saw her husband and his, to her, unwelcome mother *tête-à-tête*.

'Am I *de trop*?' she asked languidly, seating herself, and taking up a book.

'How can you think so?' asked Duncan, tenderly bending over her, and admiring the white parting of her glossy black hair, which showed the exquisite contour of her head.

'Because I had an idea that you were talking about me.'

'And so we were, Augusta; I was hoping that if—if I have to leave you behind me, darling, that mother would be kind to you, and look after you——'

'After *me*!' laughed Augusta; 'well, I hope that I shall not be eyed through *her* spectacles. Mothers-in-law are proverbial, you know; and as for your mater——'

'Well?'

She was judiciously silent, but he felt the unspoken sneer; and after a pause, Duncan said, though she petulantly withdrew her hand, which he had taken in his:

'Augusta, that I love you, you know; but God only knows how purely and how passionately. The reverence my mother alone had of me I now divide with you; the love of the sister I never had is yours, and the love for my poor dead brother too. Gamester that I am,' he continued, in a broken voice, 'I have staked on you my all of life, and lost!'

She bit her lip, and beat the floor impatiently with her handsome little foot.

'But I shall trouble you no more. I shall take measures for joining the regiment at once, leaving you all you wanted.'

'And what is that?'

'Can you ask me?—wealth!'

Her dark eyes flashed dangerously, and Duncan began to repent, thinking he had spoken harshly.

'Augusta,' said he, resuming his tender tone, 'is not happiness the thing we anticipate most, and hope for most, in married life?'

'Perhaps,' she replied, with haughty indifference, for his last utterance had stung her.

'There is no "perhaps" in it at all, darling.'

'But society requires so much of us that—that—it is impossible.'

Duncan sighed.

'You are always talking of—love. Is not esteem enough? I do esteem you, Captain Daljarroch,' continued the imperious beauty, in her cutting manner; 'but more than that would prove—prove—or make me——'

'What!'

'*Ennuyante.*'

'Oh, Augusta!' said he, reproachfully.

'You spoke just now of wealth, sir—that is surely one of the sources of happiness? Papa wished me to marry you—I have done so; what more *do* you want?'

Duncan feared just then to urge more, and as she addressed herself to her book, thereby haughtily indicating that she considered the conversation ended, he buckled on his claymore and departed, with a sob in his throat, to some duty at the castle; and the moment he was gone, Augusta sat down composedly to write to her sister Auriel a letter, the end of which she did not then foresee.

He felt, as he said, that he had already played his last card in the great game of life. The Master of Evil had triumphed. Duncan had indeed lost, and the sooner he was with the regiment in the Khost Valley, and face to face with the Afghans, the better.

To him existence appeared only like something to be borne, or endured, because there was the hope that at the end of it he might meet Augusta sometime; not as he had known her

in this selfish world, but as she must be in the next. So, trying to be intent on his routine of duty, brave Duncan trod doggedly on ; but the day was not to close without a domestic storm, and startling events.

'Bound together,' he thought, 'yet with no union of hearts—no communion of soul ; the mutual victims of overmastering fate and circumstances ! Her happiness and love are as life to me, and it is an awful thing to feel one's fate in the hands of another, as mine is in hers.'

Should he confer with the earl on the subject ? No ; he shrank from that. The total difference in their dispositions—one so close, proud, artful, and selfish ; the other so open, gentle, true, and affectionate—forbade their being even united by the ties of friendship.

But Duncan did not yet consider that matters were so bad as they might have been, if, with her indifference of him on one hand, Augusta had conceived a fancy for someone else on the other.

Returning some hours after, he found her reclining on the sofa. She was admirably attired in a costume and amply pocketed apron for lawn tennis, at which she and Sidney St. John, with some others, had been playing all the afternoon ; she the gayest of the gay, and the cloud only coming over her with her husband's return. So now she was weary and disposed to be cross.

As a peace-offering, he had brought her a beautiful bouquet of what he knew to be her favourite flowers.

'Is this for me ?' she asked languidly.

'For who else, darling ?'

'Thanks ; put it down. I have plenty of flowers, and Sidney has just brought me some beautiful blush-roses.'

'You seem in a bad humour, Augusta,' said Duncan, casting his gift on an ottoman.

'Fleurette has just lost a twenty-pound note.'

'Then I hope some poor fellow has found it. But you look pale, Augusta.'

'I do wish you would not worry me!' she exclaimed, half turning from him. 'Pale—am I so?'

'Yes, dearest; you have over-excited yourself, and are pale.'

'As death, say—would it were death!'

'Augusta!' said Duncan, gravely and reproachfully; 'do you loathe me so much?'

'No.'

'What then—what do you loathe?'

'My own life,' she replied evasively and fretfully.

'Augusta darling, I do not understand the wicked, wanton, and sinful tone you adopt.'

'Am I to be worried for ever?' she exclaimed, starting up with her eyes sparkling. 'Understand this, then—that I hate you!'

'Hate me?'

'Yes,' she continued, pitilessly.

'Oh no, no! do not say that!' said he, shrinking as if from a lightning-flash. He heard her as if he heard her not—with a stunned aspect, and a lurking consciousness, a deadly fear that all this was not the end of it.

'You bought me from papa!' she began, giving full swing to her pent-up and now ungovernable pride, temper, and foolish indignation.

'Bought you! Oh, Augusta! why speak so horribly, so cruelly to me?'

'You have acted ungenerously.'

'To the earl?' asked Duncan, thinking of the thousands he had paid over to Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett for that noble lord's behoof.

'The earl—no,' she replied, with a conscious and momentary blush on her white face.

'To whom, then?'

'Me.'

'You, Lady Augusta!' said Duncan, almost with hauteur; 'will you have the kindness to say how?'

'In marrying me at all,' replied Augusta, still acting her

strange and incomprehensible rôle, yet feeling—now that her blind passion and petulance had found vent—her heart almost relenting to the handsome, tender and loving fellow who regarded her with an indescribable expression of great sorrow on his now blanched face.

She covered hers with her hands, and sank down sobbing on the sofa. There was a time when he would have sprung to her side and covered her face with kisses at an exhibition like this, but now he neither stirred hand nor foot.

He seemed like one standing by the death-bed of the dearest on earth—to have no present and no future, but only a desire to forget that he existed.

‘She hates me—hates me!’ he repeated mentally. ‘Oh, my God! what have I done to deserve this from her—she to whom I offered my love—to whom I plighted my troth, as she to me, *until death us do part*—and to whom I have sacrificed my all—my very existence? Is this the new life, the new creation on which I thought I was about to enter and be happy for ever? Ah!’ he thought bitterly, ‘he was right who wrote, that “never” and “forever” have been cuckoo-cries of all lovers for all time! So—so! my golden idol is after all but a very image of clay! Thank God, mother did not hear her! this would have broken her heart!’

She was still sobbing violently, and Duncan’s big heart began to be moved. He thought of her pityingly, and still with love and admiration; and he was gazing, like one in a dream, on her exquisite profile, so pure and patrician, her delicate ears and neck, and all her actions which fascinated like the look of a basilisk, when he became suddenly aware that a livery-servant, with a somewhat stupefied expression on his face, as if bewildered by the unusual scene or situation, was standing by his side with a letter, which had just come by post, upon a silver salver.

Duncan snatched it, and the man withdrew. He tore it open, and with the first words he read, an interjection expressive of so much astonishment, dismay, and perhaps sorrow,

escaped him involuntarily, that Augusta dried her tears and looked up inquiringly, but in vain.

A mortal paleness had overspread the face of her husband. His lips were quivering with emotion; his very eyes seemed to have sunk in his head; his hand trembled so much, that the paper rustled as he read the letter for the third time: and even Augusta, with all her indifference, petulance and cruelty, regarded him with something of pity and anxious alarm.

Suddenly he seemed to become conscious of her presence. He said nothing, but gave her a glance, so singular, so indescribable and unfathomable in its expression, that she never forgot it, and turning abruptly, he left the room.

A few minutes after, she heard some bustle in the hall, and saw him—his uniform exchanged for mufti—leave the house, with a small travelling-bag in his hand, and enter a cab, while uttering some words of adieu to his mother.

'I thought hearts broke only on the stage,' he exclaimed, with a sickly smile. 'I think otherwise now, mother.'

'To the railway-station,' she heard him say, and he was quickly driven away.

That night he did not return, nor the next day either; and Augusta, who began to forbode some growing evil from this sudden departure, in conjunction with the letter, on sending a message to Charlie Oliphant next day, was informed that her husband had obtained two days' leave concerning urgent business.

About what? Could it be connected with his threatened departure for India?

CHAPTER XX.

THE LETTER OF AUGUSTA.

LONDON was intensely and monotonously dull—the West-end thereof, at least—and the empty sun-baked streets

looked white and parched in the glare of the August sun; yet the tide of life and bustle eastward of Temple Bar—or where that barrier stood—yea, and of Charing Cross, seethed and surged to and fro as usual, and all unaffected by the absence of the World of Fashion.

Auriel felt occasionally an emotion of annoyance when some stray friend, 'just passing through,' expressed astonishment to find her in town at this time; and a conscious blush crossed her soft cheeks as the earl's cold eye fell on her, knowing that she herself was the cause of it all.

Save a fashionable marriage in Westminster, when she had figured as one of the eight bridesmaids all costumed alike—*à la* Watteau—her excitements had been generally of the mildest description since the return to Mayfair: the Windsor and Eton regatta; the meet of the Devon and Somerset staghounds at Hawcombe Head, where a fine stag broke away from the Combe, and when the dogs were laid on the scent, her young brother, Lord Ochtertyre, rode boldly and well over a stiff line of country that was terribly heavy and hilly; but all else was to Auriel flat, stale, and unprofitable.

The dulness, however, was varied by the unwelcome visits at intervals of Sir John Lennell, and the annoyance to her of what these visits implied, and how her father watched her deportment when they occurred.

She dared no more, even when alone, lest she should be detected, sing or play 'The Young Chevalier;' nor could she venture on the other song she had more than once sung to Charlie when they were alone. For Charlie was more to her than she had ever admitted to herself; and often, after a hot canter in the lonely and now deserted Row, she would return wearily to think over the dulness of a London evening in the great silent house, and recall the past hours at Abercairnie, embosomed among the woody hills, when Charlie Oliphant was there—such happy golden hours 'as come but *once* in any lifetime, when heads draw close together, and lips form tender words, and eyes look love to eyes that speak again.'

But one day when returning thus, she received a fillip in the form of a letter from Augusta—a letter, the length of which surprised her ; but then Augusta had not written her for a long time.

‘In your last, dear Auriel, you inquired about our mode of life here,’ said one part of the epistle ; ‘but I can only say that I am as weary of “the Bridge” as Sidney is. He deems it, as usual, most “un-English,” as Bath or Tunbridge are his ideas of what a Spa should be, just as Brighton is the perfection of a watering-place.

‘You know that I have always been accustomed to gratify my own inclinations, and never even as a child could brook any check or remonstrance from governess-people or anyone else ; thus I have had more than once to tell Captain Daljarroch to spare himself the trouble of dictates or admonitions, however tenderly expressed ; and since then he has been wont to treat me with a studious politeness, rather than softness of manner.

‘But times there are when I almost feel sorry for him, as he seems one of those devoted Dobbins whom no slight or snubbing will put out in any way ; yet he lavishes upon me all he has, and thinks nothing too costly to lay at my feet. But yesterday I was weak enough to lose my temper with that odious *gauche* personage his mother, who clumsily overturned a table and broke the lovely Venetian glass vase given me as a wedding-gift by Sir John Lennell. You remember its stem, encircled by rings of blue, and the bowl studded with specks of gold—a miracle of beauty it was ; but Duncan only laughed, and said he would give me one of thrice the value, if I would not speak cuttingly to the mother.

‘“One cannot help one’s feelings,” said I.

‘“Then I must stop your lips with a kiss,” said he.

‘“Odious !” I exclaimed ; “stuff, Captain Daljarroch ! absurd !”

‘And then he left me, yet with a sad glance of reproach ; but I must keep him in his place ; and indeed, were it not

for Sidney, who is master of so many topics and habits which we have in common, life here would be too utterly intolerable. Only imagine the horrible old mater saying gravely to me: "With all my noble Duncan's great love for you, Lady Augusta, it cuts me to the heart to see that you cannot develop even a *pong-shong* for him."

"A what?" I asked.

"A *pong-shong*, my dear," she repeated with still greater gravity, and shaking all the laces in her wonderful cap.

'With all my annoyance I could not restrain my laughter, at which her "Duncan" became very indignant, as he has a profound veneration for the old plebeian; and drawing me aside, he said:

"Augusta, I implore you not to treat my worthy mother thus! A little time, and she and I may part to meet no more. Her French is not quite perfect, I grant you; but we are not so lowly born as you deem, and as your manner so often would imply. My mother at least comes of the——"

"I don't want to hear," I interrupted: "it is so easy to invent."

"What?" he asked, impetuously.

"Well—anything—say relationship," said I, quietly fanning myself.

"Not if one has—has——"

"What?" I asked, in turn.

"A pedigree!"

"Oh, do not let us quarrel about pedigrees, my poor Captain Daljarroch," said I; "that would be quite too absurd."

'Oh, how *could* she speak thus to dear Duncan!' exclaimed Auriel in a low voice, like a moan.

'Then, for the first time since our marriage, he gave me a look that made me shrink, but he said, gently:

"Oh, Augusta! why is it that you, so young, so admired and loved by me and others, will do nothing towards brightening the life of one who adores you as I do?"

‘“Because,” said I——’

Here this letter, in all of which Auriel glanced in vain for the name of Charlie, even once, broke abruptly off, and seemed to have been resumed three days later.

‘Oh, Auriel, pity me ! for I think something too awfully dreadful has happened, or is about to happen ; for Captain Daljarroch now seems to disdain taking me into his confidence.’

‘Can she wonder at it ?’ thought the startled Auriel.

‘After I had begun my letter three days ago, he came back from Stirling Castle in a dreadfully sullen humour, and only because I slighted a trumpery bouquet he brought me ; and, for the first time, we had, eventually, quite a vulgar quarrel about buying me from papa, or what he had done for papa, I know not which.’ (Auriel’s blood became alternately hot and cold as she read on, and knew not what to think of conduct so altogether unlike what the tender and courteous Duncan would, or could, be guilty of.) ‘Even my tears did not affect him, and I was rash enough to say that I hated him—a foolish thing to say ;—and now I begin to see the force of the Arabian axiom—“When silent, you rule over your words ; but when you speak, the words rule over *you* !”

‘Amid this most unseemly scene a letter was put in his hands—a letter the contents of which seemed simply to appal him ! He grew pale as death, and an expression which I cannot describe or define crept rapidly over his features. His respiration came in painful gasps, his strong figure trembled like an aspen branch ; and giving me a terrible glance, he crushed up the letter and quitted the room, without vouchsafing me—his wedded wife, an earl’s daughter—one word of explanation.

‘He did more. He quitted the house abruptly in a cab and the village by railway, I know not for where. I only know that he obtained a short leave from the commandant, and before that had, in his violence, threatened to leave me and depart for India.’

too ! Duncan, I know, will never cease to love me with the devotion of a slave ; yet I greatly fear the " crisis " he referred to must be as I suspect, and that it will be proved after all that there is a woman in the case. Good heavens ! if it should be so, what will become of me ? Papa——'

Here the writing of Augusta became quite illegible.

' Why did papa's necessities—relentless Fate—ever throw me among these people ? I seem suddenly to be no longer myself—to have lost caste, and become involved in an atmosphere of vulgar mystery, alarm and danger.

' Whatever it is that has come upon Duncan, he seeks consolation only from his mother, and I overheard her say, just as he was departing on another mysterious journey, that lately she had " dreamt thrice about her poor dead Willie, and that whenever she did so, something unfortunate was sure to happen ! " How can people believe in such vulgar and old-fashioned absurdity ! Yet I heard Daljarroch respond by something like a groan.'

The startled Auriel rushed away to her father with this alarming letter. She found the noble lord seated in a magnificently furnished library, clad in a luxurious cashmere dressing-gown tied by silken tassels, and seated in a velvet chair, at a table littered with letters ; for though not overweighted with brains, money and position entailed upon him an amount of correspondence that became absolute boredom, though he seldom responded to the half of the letters, and never at all to the applications that came to him.

Through Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, some of ' those communists,' the farmers at Abercairnie, had been imploring to have a little percentage off their rents. Agricultural matters, if bad in England had been worse in the North ; harvest there would be late in October instead of September ; the cereal crops were quite green, and much on the upland braes would never ripen at all. Some urged that they and their forefathers had been long on the estate, and had never been in distress before ; one had a daughter to marry ;

another a son to set out in the world ; a third had a whole family ailing on his hands, and so forth ; but the earl, without moving a muscle, wrote across the letters, '*Refused in toto.—Abercairnie,*' and slipped them into an envelope for his agents in Edinburgh.

The next paper only elicited a snort of contempt from the long thin aristocratic nose before referred to. It was an application from a Scottish humane society in London, appealing to him as a Scottish peer, on behalf of the orphans and widows of Scottish soldiers who had fallen in Afghanistan and Zululand, and hinting that his son-in-law, Captain Daljarroch of the Duke of Albany's Own Highlanders, had 'with his usual generosity sent one hundred guineas.'

'A fool and his money—pah!' muttered the earl, and tossed the document into the waste-paper basket. 'Now, Auriel, I am busy ; what do *you* want ?'

'Read this paper—a terrible letter from Augusta—a letter I don't understand at all,' she replied.

'A terrible letter ?'

He read it rapidly yet carefully, and with an utterly unmoved countenance. In the innate selfishness of his heart, he had little or no sympathy with the alarm or surprise (*grief* it certainly was *not*) of his daughter Augusta, and supposed it could only be the result of some stupid quarrel—some piece of acting in bad taste—on the part of Captain Daljarroch to pique her ; and being disinclined to give himself trouble or occasion to think, 'decided upon letting such turtle-doves alone,' and was about to dismiss the whole thing from his noble mind and memory till roused by the unconcealed agitation of Auriel.

'I cannot say,' he began, lying back in his luxurious chair, and twirling the tassels of his girdle—'I *cannot* say that I ever liked this man Daljarroch. His political opinions, and what he calls nationality, are *so* narrow-minded, that I scarcely think he is burdened with any mind at all—an out-and-out Scotch communist ! He is a wealthy one, however ; and I

hope that, for our Augusta's sake, he may get killed off before this Indian war is over.'

'Oh, papa—such a wish! Poor Duncan! poor Duncan!' said Auriel, so sweetly and reproachfully.

'Whatever may be hidden in this affair which seems so unnecessarily to alarm Augusta, say not a word of it to Sir John Lennell.'

'Of course not, papa,' replied Auriel, with some hauteur of manner; 'wherefore should I? I have not—and can have—no confidences with Sir John Lennell.'

The thin smooth skin on the earl's forehead contracted slightly, as he said quietly but pointedly, yet haughtily:

'I have also to say, that I hope you will gather experience from all this, and deem one *mésalliance* enough in the family of Abercairnæ.'

'Be quite easy on that head, dear papa,' retorted Auriel, 'for I have quite made up my mind.'

'To what, Auriel?'

'Never to marry,' she replied, with a little laugh.

'Never!'

The earl was frowning now.

'Yes.'

'Absurd girl!'

'Could I dare to do so after so terrible a picture of matrimony as this letter of poor Augusta gives us?' asked Auriel.

And she withdrew to preclude the application of more advice just then, but sorely disappointed by her father's unconcealed indifference to the matter in hand.

Impulsive Auriel opened her desk; she would write to Charlie Oliphant, she thought, and ask him all about this mysterious *contretemps* at the Bridge of Allan; but—how was she to address him?

Then, though alone, she blushed deeply. She could not write to him now, after the farewell message especially; and anon, if he wrote in return, as of course he must certainly do—it was too dreadful to think of that! Why not write to

Duncan—kind, good Duncan, her own brother-in-law? But she shrank from that too. Could she expect, or had she a right to expect, that he would explain aught to her which he declined to disclose to his own wife?

Once more she implored her father the earl to do so, but he politely and firmly declined to move in a matter which, had he known it, would have startled even his stolid soul more than he was aware of.

CHAPTER XXI.

A MYSTERY UNRAVELLED.

AS we do not mean to keep the reader in the dark, or to enhance the apparent mystery of Duncan Daljarroch's proceedings, we shall recur at once to the letter which summoned him so hurriedly away.

It was very brief, and signed by Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, Writers to her Majesty's Signet, Edinburgh :

' MY DEAR SIR,

' Do us the favour of calling upon us at our office here at your earliest convenience. Your elder brother, Mr. William Daljarroch, whom we all believed to have been killed in India, is alive and now in town, and heir to all your father left and you possess, and seems ready to enforce a severe action of count and reckoning ; a serious complication of affairs—one beyond our calculation, but ruin to you, at all events.'

Carefully Duncan read it through a second time ; so carefully that he could have repeated over every word of this astounding epistle, the contents of which seemed to be burned into his brain.

Then he folded it carefully, as if it was the last letter he

was to receive on this earth, mechanically replaced it in its envelope, gave Augusta that glance which was so inscrutable to her, and withdrew to another room. Placing his elbows on the table and his hot throbbing forehead on his hands, that trembled and grew icy cold, he remained thus for some moments motionless as a statue, and trying to think.

Alas ! he could but think of *her* loss, not his !

Then he started up, and after a brief explanation to his mother, left the house, as Augusta described in her letter ; and in a few minutes ' old Stirling's towers and town ' were left behind, and he was speeding along the railway past the Torwood to Edinburgh, with his brain in a whirl and his mind a very chaos.

Willie alive after all ! From his boyhood he had been a trouble to the family ; he had well-nigh broken his loving mother's heart, and had embittered the last days of his industrious father, who had cleared off his reckless debts again and again, though, as he said, he might as well have cast his money into the Kelvin or the Clyde. Then Willie passed away, and for long nothing was known of him or his whereabouts, till tidings came that he had been slain—a private soldier—on the frontier far beyond the Indus.

Duncan accused himself of lack of filial affection ; of due honour to his father's memory ; of avarice and guilt in regretting even for a moment—oh no, no ! he could not regret that Willie lived, and gladly would he have surrendered all his heritage, even to the last penny, but for Augusta. And with the threat of ' count and reckoning ' came the thought of all he had spent on her, and all he had bestowed, a free gift, upon the thankless earl ! Would Willie demand restitution ?

That seemed very improbable, considering the thoughtless, reckless and spendthrift character of his past career ; but if his nature had changed, and his case was taken in hand by some low legal shark, what then ?

Betimes Duncan found himself in the broad sunny streets

of Edinburgh, still acting and moving as one in a waking dream. It was long since he had been there, and he wondered now at the little interest the grandeur of its features had for him. Yet on one hand rose the mighty castle and the old city, the focus of ancient memories so dear to every Scotsman, the deep vale between it and the New Town—all so rich and varied in their range of features, while 'the quick life of to-day, sounding around the relics of antiquity and overshadowed by the august traditions of a kingdom, serve to make a residence in Edinburgh more impressive than any other British city.'

The pipers of some regiment were playing' high in air on the grassy slope at the northern summit of the castle rock, waking the echoes of bastion and battlement ; but not even the pipes then could stir a chord in the heart of Daljarroch.

A cab deposited him at the chambers of Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, in one of the narrow and rather gloomy streets that lie between the main arteries of the western New Town ; but the senior partner alone was there, a well-meaning, bustling, and rather gentlemanly little man, with bald head, a fringe of white hair, and large gold spectacles, and of whom we may say that,

' Though a W.S.,
And ambitious to thrive,
Even his foes must confess,
Cheated no man alive.
Neither harried poor gentry
Of house or of land,
Nor bolted the country
With cash in his hand.'

From a writing-table littered by letters, and dockets, and quarto printed interlocutors, summonses, etc., tied with red tape, in a room the walls of which, where not covered by bookshelves or county maps, were occupied by tin charter-boxes on iron frames, he started in his leather easy-chair and warmly welcomed Daljarroch, who looked pale, harassed, and dejected, as he cast himself into a seat.

' Good-morning, Captain Daljarroch—good-morning, my

‘dear sir,’ continued the fussy little lawyer, with great *empressement*; ‘sad *contretemps* this—very! Would that I could congratulate you on being a younger brother again in any fashion! but no, my dear sir—no, it is impossible—impossible!’ and he thoughtfully pulled his outer lip, and fixed his eyes on the ceiling for a second or two.

His sleek, calm, smiling self-possession of manner grated sorely just then on the fretful and impatient spirit of Duncan; but everyone bears with ease and fortitude the wrongs, woes, and cares of others; and then, one is apt to forget that a lawyer lives and thrives in the very midst of them.

‘You have seen my brother, I presume?’ said Duncan, breaking silence.

‘We both have, my dear sir,’ replied Mr. Thirlage; ‘bearded and brown, he seems as drunken and dissipated as ever, and will make ducks and drakes of all your father left. When the latter finally expelled him from his house, oh, why was he so foolish as to die without executing a will?’

‘He delayed until it was too late—too late! But please do not mention this matter as yet to the Earl of Abercairnie,’ said Duncan, wearily; ‘Augusta will hear of it soon enough. But with such a wife as she is, Mr. Thirlage, this event is double ruin to me—bankruptcy of the heart itself. Poor ill-fated Willie! and he is as bad as ever, you say?’

‘Worse, I think—not that I ever saw him before he—he enlisted.’

‘And where is he now?’

‘With some of his old friends at the castle canteen, or recruiting-rendezvous. I gave him a twenty-pound note just to keep his pocket going, and he left with me these, as the first proofs of his identity.’

Mr. Thirlage laid before Duncan a steel latch-key and a soldier’s ‘small-book,’ a few leaves octavo, bound in vellum and tied with green tape. It contained the personal description of Willie in the usual form, with his signature repeatedly, and was spotted with what appeared to be blood.

'Ah! that was when he was wounded by the Afreedies,' said Mr. Thirlage; 'and this was the key of his father's house.'

'Poor Willie! he found it in his pocket long after he enlisted, and by a superstition of the heart, never parted with it, but kept it as a relic of his home—a link with happier and past days. I know it was with him in all his marches through Central India and far beyond the Indus.'

'To attempt to compromise this matter—compound with him, as it were—buy him off, in fact,' said the lawyer, after a long and silent pause, 'even if we can legally do it—'

'Would be a crime!' said Duncan, hotly. 'He is the eldest son of his father, and the patrimony is his.'

'Nay, my dear sir; I was only about to say—be wise, be calm—if we can legally do it.'

'No, no, no!'

'Yes, yes, say I. To give him *all* would ruin him, and you too.'

'How?'

'He neither knows the use nor the value of money. Why, my dear sir, the man is a mere sot—pardon me for saying so.'

'Poor Willie! poor Willie!' exclaimed Daljarroch, twisting his heavy moustache, and sighing bitterly. 'I wish I could see him, and hear his voice again.'

'He seems rather anxious to avoid you.'

'Why?'

'Difference of character and position, perhaps; and then he seemed astonished—quite scared in fact—when I told him of your marriage with Lady Augusta Menteith. I should like, for your sake and hers, to arrange with him, if possible—that is, if he can be made to understand the value of a bond or document—'

'For what?'

'A sum, my dear sir—a sum which I doubt whether he would accept in full of all his claims; for when I hinted of such a thing, he started out of that chair in which you are

seated, and after swearing many round oaths at you, declared that you were wrongfully in possession of what was his, and would have no negotiation that did not involve a surrender of everything—even, as he phrased it, to “stumping up” all you have spent.’

‘He must have become sorely deteriorated from the Willie of other days.’

‘Yet, if for a sum——’

‘No more—I’ll not hear of it!’

‘Leave him to me, my dear sir.’

‘Well?’

‘I’ll contrive some way to bind him down to——’

‘Could I but see him!’ said Duncan, impetuously, as a great longing to behold the long-vanished face came into his affectionate heart.

‘Impossible!’

‘Why?’

‘Because, drunk or sober, he refuses absolutely to meet, or treat with you.’

‘Strange! we were the best of friends in other days. Has he employed any personal or special legal agent?’

‘Stranger still, he never seems to think of such a thing: but seems to suppose that he has only to take possession, walk the course, and win the race. But if he should fall into the hands of any agent, all hope of terms will then be at an end; your advances to Lord Abercairnie must be refunded, and Lady Augusta’s settlements will be—nil!’

Duncan knew all this, and feared it; yet when he heard it put in words, he started as if a wasp had stung him.

‘There can be no doubt of his identity?’ he suddenly asked.

‘Oh, none; he is more familiar with your family, its history and antecedents, than I am. Then there is this “small-book,” in which the description tallies with him, word for word, and line for line; and mentions a mole on his left breast, by which he says his own dear mother would know him to be her Willie in an instant. I shall write you the moment we

are in communication with him again ; meantime, be calm, my dear sir, and keep your mind easy.'

How *easy* it was for the smiling lawyer to say this, all ignorant as he was of Duncan's domestic troubles, and the endless, hopeless, and terrible complications that were now certain to ensue. But no more was to be said then, and he took his departure, the sad and inquiring expression his face had worn now becoming a gloomy and passionate one.

Dreamily and moodily he walked through the bustle of the sun-lighted streets. Was all this truth—fact? Was he dreaming that a great fortune was passing away from him, and with it, too probably, Augusta, his wife though she was?

He paused occasionally in all he did—paused, and though full of intense thought, looked about him to be assured that he was not asleep, and the outer world was still the same.

That his brother lived was but a mixed satisfaction, when his reckless and dissipated character was considered, together with the ruin his reappearance would cause.

For a time—a very little time—the cold and cutting speeches of Augusta—the disdain levelled at himself, and more especially at his mother—were recalled bitterly. He had come to heavy grief—almost shame, indeed ; yet could he drag her down with him—deprive her of all those splendid surroundings which to her, by use and wont, were the mere necessities of life, so that no hour could pass now without some pleasure being denied, some useless but desired object unattained?

Revenge whispered—but he thrust revenge aside, and an emotion of great pity filled his heart.

'How can I tell her of all this—how meet her upbraidings? No—no ; better face anything ! But what a dreadful mortification for her !' he thought, passing from her pride and selfishness ; yet the idea would come again, 'This ruin may teach her and her father a terrible lesson. Thank God that, anyway, my dear old mother is safe from want—secure in what my father left her: as for me, I have still my sword and

the Queen's commission. To India—to India! get to the front, and forget—if I can—all about it!

Then he thought of Kingsley's song, and the night Charlie sang it at the mess, when the last verse came with strange forebodings even then :

' When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown,
And all the sport is stale, lad,
And all the wheels run down ;
Creep home and take your place there
The spent and maimed among ;
God grant you find one face there,
You loved when all was young.'

He searched sedulously for his brother wherever he could think it probable to find him, and then, after a day or two, returned sadly home.

CHAPTER XXII.

' ALL IS OVER !'

AND in returning home, he sought not the presence of Augusta for consolation ; but leaving the proud beauty a prey to more curiosity, anger, and indignation than she would have cared to own, he went direct to the apartments of his anxious and excited mother, to whom he related all that Mr. Thirlage had told him.

He found her seated in her easy-chair, with a cabinet portrait of the long-deemed dead son placed upon a reading-desk, that she might regard it at leisure. It had always been with her, wherever she went ; and when entering her sanctum, she knew who she would find there (for the scapegrace son had been dearly loved by her)—Willie in a round jacket and falling collar—Willie in his tenth year, with rosy cheeks and rich dark hair, a bright and smiling boyish lace ; and often she was wont to kiss the broad and unlined brow, the original of which she thought was lying in a distant grave : and now she was saying to herself, even as Duncan entered :

'For this my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost and is found ! But why comes not my Willie to me ?' she asked, after hearing all that Duncan had to say.

'Lady Augusta's presence doubtless scares him, dearest mother,' replied Duncan, as he cast himself wearily into a chair ; 'besides, from all I could learn, Willie is greatly changed in character, and, mother, for the worse. He views me with absolute hostility and repugnance, and means to exact the return of all I have spent or intermeddled with. Which simply means ruin and degradation,' he added, thinking of Lady Augusta.

'My poor Duncan !' said his mother, stroking his thick and dark brown hair caressingly ; 'this sort of thing must not be, and all will yet be well, now that our waefu' wilfu' Willie has come back as it were from the grave. And all these years he has, you say, carried the little door-key as a relic of his home, a memento of his father's house, to which he would yet, as of old, return ! Is it not strange, this, Duncan ? One night I was awakened by the well-known sound as it used to be—the sound made by Willie putting that identical key into the house-door. I started up and listened ! Yes—yes, there it was ! Three times it was put into the lock, and three times failed to open the door, while I sat up in bed as if spell-bound ! A knock rang on the door, and then my heart stood still, for it was Willie's very knock ! I sprang from bed and rang my bell ; but all sound had ceased, and there was no one at the door, or in the long vista of the moonlit street without. It was the night of the 10th October—the night, as we heard after, that Willie had been slain by the Afreedies.'

'Well, mother, you deemed all that a spirit's warning ; but here is Willie home again, sound in wind and limb,' said Duncan—'home to claim the patrimony that is his ; and by the time he is fairly installed in it, I hope to be smoking the calumet of peace in Cabul—or to find my grave in the Khyber Pass,' he added to himself.

Augusta, to whom, in the natural promptings of his heart, he would first have rushed for consolation and advice, he now shrunk from with a kind of nervous dismay. How could he tell *her* that he was now worse than a penniless man? and he was inclined to agree with Selden, in his 'Table Talk:' 'Marriage is a desperate thing. The frogs in Æsop were extremely wise; they had great mind to have some water, but would not leap into the well, because they could not get out again.'

Duncan thought bitterly now :

'She asked me not to quit the service—that was well! I would not quit the Highlanders now for the value of the National Debt; but I shall quit *her*, sail to India, and get killed in Afghanistan if I can. Of what value is life to me now, with the burning memory of those words, "I hate you," graven as it were on my very soul! Death would set her free. My dear old mother was right in her predictions of how my fine marriage would turn out, when I forgot that I was a tradesman's son, and only remembered that I loved Augusta—and God knows how I did, and do, love her!'

Duncan Daljarroch now found himself, by no fault of his own, in a thoroughly false position with Augusta and her family—a position that would degrade him in their eyes; and like the majority of the proud-spirited who are in a false position, he felt unreasonably irritated and sensitive. Amid it all, his heart bled for Augusta.

'Poor girl!' he muttered, 'her time for humiliation, if not regret for her treatment of me, has come now; for "though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small."'

He found her alone in the drawing-room, reclining in an easy-chair; her cheek was resting on a hand of marvellous whiteness, as she bent over a novel, which she was affecting to read, and from which she did not look up until Duncan, of whose approach she was perfectly conscious, stood by her side. She looked pale; but he too looked pale, and his face

seemed sorely changed. If not haggard, it had become worn ; his lips quivered frequently ; involuntary sighs escaped him, and Augusta could read a great sadness in his eyes and depression in his manner. Yet, strange to say, she only felt defiant ; for the mystery of the last forty-eight hours, while piquing her usually languid curiosity, had exasperated her pride.

Duncan was longing to take her in his arms tenderly and caressingly ; but her bearing forbade it, and he was forced to content him by merely touching her hand, when she said, with a curl on her beautiful lip :

'You have condescended to come at last, Captain Daljarroch, to dispel or explain the mystery in which your recent movements have been involved since you received that disturbing letter, with the contents of which you cared not to acquaint me.'

'I was not aware that I or my humble affairs had any interest for you,' replied Duncan, imitating her coldness of manner in spite of himself ; 'and yet—and yet—if you knew all, even your heart, hard as it is, would assuredly be stirred——'

'And the mystery ?' she demanded, tapping the carpet with her foot.

'Is mine as yet.'

'Then keep it so, and leave me to peruse my book.'

'My mother, then, has given you no hints ?'

'No—but hints of *what* ? Your mother has acted as strangely as yourself, Captain Daljarroch ; but what could I expect ? One cannot make a silk purse—you understand ; but may I ask when that good lady, who secludes herself in her room as if my society were distasteful to her, means to remove to her own residence ?'

'When I am gone, which must be soon now. I cannot part with her yet—my only friend on earth. Knowing, as I do, her kindness of heart, her charity and benevolence, and great love for me, I deem her worthy of all that esteem you decline to bestow upon her. You accused me, when last we

spoke, of buying you from your father the earl. Be it so, madam,' continued Duncan, controlling his mingled emotion, yet speaking with a broken voice. 'Our marriage was a bargain, according to your own words. A part of that bargain is this farewell visit of my mother to me—a last farewell perhaps it may prove to me. That you will be pleased to tolerate her presence for a few days longer, is all I have to ask.'

'But I have a right to know this secret which you keep from me.'

'The woman who avows she hates me has no right to share a secret of mine. By the time you learn it, however, we shall have parted, never to meet again.'

Augusta grew deadly pale; her eyes fell, and her lips quivered. Yet pride came again to her aid, and she said:

'Then I presume Mrs. Daljarroch is honoured by your confidence?'

'To the fullest extent.'

'Indeed!'

'She is my mother.'

'I am not likely to forget that circumstance. Yet I am mistress here.'

'Scarcely.'

'What do you mean, sir?' asked Augusta, with her dark eyes dilated and sparkling, while a deadly terror seized her, that her suspicions of a previous marriage might be correct after all.

'I mean this, Augusta,' said Duncan, sadly and wearily, 'that I am a bankrupt in fortune as well as in love; that I am a ruined man—a penniless soldier now. My elder brother William—long deemed dead, poor fellow—is still alive. He has returned, and claims all—even to the dowry I settled on you when I thought myself my father's only heir. My power of possession is superseded; the luxuries with which I have surrounded you, lovingly and unsparingly, will now pass away like the palace of Aladdin; while I can

have nothing—not even a sixpence—but from William's bounty ; and it would seem that he hates me now, and is more dissipated than ever. Do you understand all this?' he asked, sadly and gently.

She remained silent, bewildered and confused, and seemed but vaguely to grasp his meaning. Then, starting up, she exclaimed :

'I understand from all this that you have ensnared me into a marriage—deluded and tricked my father and myself. Be it so ! But learn, sir, that though I have been made the victim of a vulgar lure, I shall leave you, and for ever !'

And she swept from the room like a tragedy queen.

Duncan sighed heavily, and muttered to himself :

'It is better for herself that she takes our ruin thus—but oh that she had loved me, were it ever so little ! Now *all is over !*

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MINGLED YARN.

'ARE you not shocked and amazed, papa?' asked the bewildered Auriel, when a somewhat incoherent letter from Augusta announced the startling change in her monetary affairs, and her probable return to the circle of her own family, as she could no longer tolerate a husband who had so shamefully deceived them all as to the real state of his private affairs ; for this was the way she took matters, and the tone she adopted.

'I am shocked and amazed at nothing now,' replied the earl, angrily ; 'but I suppose our Scotch communist, who is so chronically discontented with the neglect of Scotland, and her affairs and interests in Parliament, will be more discontented than ever. But I'll give him a piece of my mind. Before entrapping my daughter into a marriage with him,

he ought to have assured himself that this devil of an elder brother was really defunct.'

'It may all be some terrible mistake, papa,' said Auriel.

'I hope so—I hope so,' said the earl, who hated trouble and 'bother' of every kind; 'but I can scarcely see how it can be a mistake. And here is a fellow, Mackellar,' he added, tossing a letter from him, 'writing about the farm of Craig-nan-Heurich—the Fairy Rock; you know the place, I presume?'

'Yes, papa,' replied Auriel, faintly.

'Well!' and he says, "My grandfather, who was a sergeant in the Albany Highlanders for years, had it from your lordship's grandfather, whose life he saved at Bangalore, when the corps was known as the Marquis of Seaforth's. Then my father had the farm, and then I. Now the lease has expired, and your agents have doubled the rent. Oh, my lord! do consider my case, and my young family. We have been good tenants—good and true, too, in the olden time, when dirk and claymore were valued more than land, and I would implore you not to dispossess us." Good that, is it not?'

'This man's sentiments would suit dear Duncan exactly.'

'Then I wish dear Duncan had him as a tenant—and Duncan is likely to be *dear* enough to us all—but out Mackellar goes, if he lands in the workhouse. I would rather have the whole place under grouse and deer than be troubled with letters such as these!'

So the fiat went forth, and now, where Mackellar tilled the land, 'the brewer shoots the grouse, and the lordling stalks the deer.'

Thus the earl was in no mood to have the additional 'worry' of Augusta's affairs, as each morning the post brought him bad news from his agents concerning rents, the failure of some tenants, and the refusal of others to take farms that were lying idle on any terms, as it was a time of general agricultural depression.

Duncan's affairs were a new and horrible complication. What if Duncan's advances prior to his marriage had to be refunded? and then Augusta's settlements were nowhere! Now there was all the more reason for Auriel making a wealthy and suitable marriage; but meanwhile the earl would keep his own counsel, and after relieving his mind by a cutting epistle to Duncan, he rode off to his club, and those who saw him smiling, talking, and leisurely conning the morning papers, would little have imagined the doubts and clouds in which he was involved, for the earl was a man full of many tender sympathies for himself.

Thus, two days after, as Duncan was departing to morning parade, the post brought him a couple of letters: one was from the earl, and the gross unkindness and injustice of its tone, while it stung him deeply, provoked no retort, and he quietly tore it up.

The other was from Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, who had seen his brother again, and obtained from him other and apparently irrefragable proofs of his identity: not that they ever doubted it; but in a legal process much was necessary to be proved, 'and communications must be made to India,' ran the letter, 'and all this will cause some delay.' He was vociferous in demanding his property at once, and could not be made to understand the law's delay; but as his whole ideas of happiness were idleness and hourly intoxication, it was not probable that the property—though he might terribly impair it—would be long in his possession. Some more money was given him, and he went forth into the streets grumbling and swearing at the world in general.

'If *she* despised me when rich,' thought Duncan, 'how must she view me now, when poor? Oh, my God! is this the end of my love-dream—the dear, dear dream begun so short a time ago? Delusion is gone, hope dead; vanity, if I ever had it, destroyed. It is over and done with—over and done with!'

Augusta made no sign, so they remained apart; thus his

occupation, like Othello's, seemed gone, and his honest heart was a vacuity now by the loss of those little items that make up the joy or sorrow of all our lives ; and in this mood he betook him to the castle, as he did daily, hoping each day would prove the last, as every man of his detachment was ready for India, and could start at an hour's notice.

About his income, or the sources of it, Augusta had never manifested the least interest. She knew not whether it was derived from stock, securities, or houses ; she only knew that it was not yet landed property, and that it had been made—faugh !—in trade, and thus had not cared to inquire more ; the earl had been satisfied, at all events. But she could not realise to the full the fact that it was gone.

If it were indeed the case that he had lost all, she would be degraded in the eyes of her friends—that 'society' on which she set such store. If he had *not* lost all, and the assertion was but a ruse to frighten and humble her, then she had been insulted by him ; though his strange emotion on the receipt of the mysterious letter was difficult to account for, save by the importance of its contents.

If it were indeed an attempt to humble, then doubly did it appear that she had been—as she so cuttingly phrased it—bought from the earl : and so she resolved, that until matters were arranged, and the truth was made plain before her in some fashion, she would no longer remain in that villa near the Allan, an ignored and isolated resident—a guest as it were in her own house, or one she had deemed her own, till this crash or crisis came ; but that she would leave it instantly, and for where, she cared not.

She was now compelled to seek the confidence of her cousin, Sidney St. John, and requested him to make arrangements for her departure.

'For where?' he asked languidly—'Mayfair?'

'Certainly not—as yet.'

'It were the wisest course, Augusta.'

But she declined ; so little had the earl ever done to win

the love of his children, that now, in her anger and humiliation, she shrank from joining him, and said :

‘ Let it be Paris, Brighton—anywhere out of this !’

Sidney, who had been regarding her leisurely and admiringly through his eye-glass, said :

‘ Come then, let me think over it—talk over it—and better than all——’

‘ What ?’

‘ Smoke over it.’

We shall see the result—a very rash one—of this mutual consultation ere long ; but if the languid St. John had any doubts or difficulties, in her anger and impetuosity Augusta swept him into her plans.

Between him and Duncan there was little love to lose. The latter deemed the cousinship an excuse for intrusion and dangling that were distasteful to a newly-married man especially ; and then Sidney and Augusta had a multitude of topics dear to themselves—topics of town and fashionable life—on which Duncan could not enter, and of which he knew little or nothing.

Sidney St. John was selfish and lazy, but his time for departure had come at last—or was very near. Thus, to save himself further trouble during Duncan’s absence, he wrote him a brief note of thanks for his hospitality—hinted at something about a telegram he had received, and took himself off ; but it would seem as if he had taken his beautiful cousin off with him too, as they left the house within about an hour of each other.

Fleurette had gone with her mistress.

Daljarroch came slowly and lingeringly home to the house that was to be his home no more ! What was it he felt as he came along totally oblivious of all surrounding objects, of the silent calm of the August evening, the cawing of the rooks in the great lime-trees, the voice of the craik among the yellow corn, and a sense of harmony floating through the air, and mingling with the flow of the Allan along its bed ?

Somehow he remembered these trivial details after ; but now he felt only a chill—a dim monition of the soul that more startling tidings were in store for him—that he stood upon the brink of an abyss, and that some great horror awaited him. And now his mother met him at the gate.

‘ Oh, Duncan !’ she exclaimed, ‘ prepare yourself !’

‘ For what, mother ?’

‘ For that which I can scarcely tell you.’

‘ Why torture me thus ? Speak, mother—speak !’

‘ Augusta is gone !’

‘ Gone—where ?’

‘ That I know not—but she has left you—and with that man !’

‘ What man ?’

‘ Her cousin St. John, I fear me !’

And it was this shock of which he had the dim monition. Poor Mrs. Daljarroch turned away her sad and tear-blistered face, as if she were afraid to meet the startled and inquiring eyes of her own son, while there came back to her memory that which she had forgotten, the scrap of a strange conversation she had overheard at his marriage between St. John and Mr. Athol McCringer.

‘ Gone !’ he repeated with a stunned aspect.

‘ There is no doubting it, Duncan darling ; she was off with that French minx ere I could stop them. But could not something be done to overtake her ere it is too late ? I cannot believe that she means guile or deceit. An innocent girl—a high-born lady seldom becomes altogether depraved of a sudden ; and yet, O Duncan, I wish you had married the daughter of old Davie of the Turkey Blue Works ! and she owns, they say, half the Gorbals.’

Here Mrs. Daljarroch fairly broke down, and sobbed heavily, with her face on Duncan’s breast and his arm round her, while he glanced wildly and sternly about him, as if seeking for a weapon or a foe.

He was a soldier, and proud of being one ; proud, too, of

his old toiling father's humble name. He was ready to do and dare 'all that may become a man ;' but this stroke was a little beyond him.

The black falsehood which in Scotland is ever associated with the name of Menteith came bitterly into his memory now.

He staggered indoors like a tipsy man. Every object his eye fell on was a source of torture to him and taunt to his affection, as illustrating how he had studied—pandered to, he now deemed it—her taste or extravagance. But all that was ended now ! She was no longer there, and had left him—left him with another !

Swelling though his heart was with just indignation, grief and shame, to Duncan nothing seemed the same now, though every object was unchanged. The sun of the autumnal evening streamed brightly through the windows upon the magnificent toilet-table covered with chaste and beautiful objects he had procured for her ; there was the plate mirror that would reflect her face no more—the laced pillows that her lovely face would never press again.

He felt himself alone—alone as if death had struck her down ; for what is separation to the tender and loving, but a living death ?—and this separation was for ever !

Duncan heard the ticking of the carriage-clock upon a little bracket ; the clock, a luxurious, useless present from Charlie Oliphant, had been with them in their little marriage tour. But when travelling by road or rail, Duncan had taken no heed of the time, whatever Augusta might have done—nay, did too probably do, to judge by her present proceedings.

The ticking of that particular clock maddened him just then ; and save that it was Charlie's gift, he had dashed it to pieces, though a beautiful work of art. But as it seemed to hammer on his brain, he stopped it.

He felt cold, yet the evening was sultry, and his head felt like a fire-ball. With the loss of Augusta—a thousand times more than the loss of fortune—the half of his life seemed to have left him.

'Perhaps she has only gone to her father,' said Mrs. Daljarroch; 'she never seemed to think my society *commey ill foo*.'

'Oh, can she be true, mother?' he sighed, when thinking how often the old lady's French had grated on Augusta's nerves.

'Women deceive often, my son,' she replied, shaking her head, sententiously.

'But so do men, mother. What *am* I to think of her? Besides, the conduct of this fellow St. John is every way remarkable, and I must not sit idly here!' he added, starting up as if intent to go away, he knew not where; but at that moment there was a loud ring at the door-bell, and a note, hastily written by Charlie Oliphant, was handed to him by his servant, Donald Macdonald, a smart young lad from the Braes of Lochaber. It contained two lines:

'The route has just come. We start to-morrow morning
—C. E. OLIPHANT.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEPARTURE.

So the word was Eastward-ho! at last.

Both Charlie and Daljarroch welcomed it. Any change was better to them now than the dull routine of garrison duty in the old fortress, though its rocks and ramparts were navelled amid glorious hills and lovely scenery; for Charlie's love affair, if a deep one, was more than dubious in its sequel, and poor Daljarroch felt himself an outcast of the heart—a very bankrupt in every way.

He spent the night by his tearful mother's side, writing many letters to his agents and others, and making such final arrangements as he could for a prolonged absence; while Charlie, who had none to make, and a third officer who was

going out with them, Cosmo Crawford, a young lieutenant, made a jovial time of it at the little depôt mess ; a supper with devilled bones, songs and choruses, that made the old halls, where Mary of Gueldres had held council with her wily chancellor, and James V. held wassail with the Lords of Guise and Lorraine, re-echo ; and champagne, soda and brandy flowed till—if any sleep was to be had at all—Charlie and his comrade Crawford were compelled to retire.

With the men of the detachment they were to lead Eastward—about one hundred rank and file—the night was spent of course less noisily. Permission to leave the castle was given as usual, in the full faith that no man would be absent on the eventful morrow, and that no man of the Duke of Albany's Own would disgrace himself on the eve of departure from his native land : and in the Castle Wynd, and other places where soldiers generally congregate, there was no boisterous revelling, but many a farewell distinguished rather by warmth of good wishes ; and many a sounding kiss was given to sister or to sweetheart when the last bugles pealed over the old castle towers, and many a hearty embrace, without a thought bestowed on the onlooking crowd.

Some there were, of course, who kept apart, as if they wished no witnesses, save the stars, of their parting caress, the moments of which were measured by the inexorable sound of the bugle, and many a farewell laugh ended in something suspiciously like a sob. The mists of a harvest morning were rolling from the silver links of the Forth along the green slopes of the magnificent Ochil mountains, when the pipes blew the 'Gathering' with a din that would have awakened the seven sleepers of Ephesus, and, in heavy marching order, the detachment of Daljarroch paraded for the last time in the wonderfully picturesque square of the old royal castle.

The graceful bonnets, with their black floating plumes, were now replaced by the hideous tropical helmets ; and in these, and in the early morning air, the men looked pale, but resolute and calm and subdued in bearing, as Daljarroch

opened their ranks for the formal and last inspection of the commandant ; and a vast number of documents were signed and exchanged, amid much fuss and *empressement*.

Charlie could see with pain that his friend's rich dark-brown hair was already seamed with white, and that his once cherished and smart moustache was left unkempt and uncared for ; yet, restrained by he knew not what secret impulse, he made no inquiries for Lady Augusta, whose absence was plainly perceptible.

'Thank God, Charlie,' said Duncan, grasping his hand, and in a husky voice, 'that the route came just in time to save me !'

'From what, old fellow ?'

'Suicide, perhaps ! But say no more—say no more !'

Daljarroch passed grimly on to join the commandant, and left his friend completely mystified. But the strange change in the other's bearing was totally unremarked by their comrade, young Crawford, who was intent on examining his new revolver, and remarked to those about him that he hoped fighting in Afghanistan 'wouldn't be all beer and skittles.'

Duncan's bearing, however, was externally that of a grave, earnest, and painstaking officer, interested in all the details of the departure ; while in secret, his thoughts were with the runaway, who had left him without a word, and gone he knew not whither.

'If,' thought he, 'she hates me as she said—and can I doubt her?—she may soon learn to love some one else. And we all know now that rank is no protection to morals, honour, or purity ; neither is the possession of it an incentive to their preservation.'

Then would Duncan's honest heart grow alternately hot as fire and cold as ice, at visions of the sorrowful and degrading future he drew : Augusta's name perhaps in every ribald's mouth, the pages of every low periodical, her lovely face in every photographer's window—their mutual name the sport of all—while he was powerless in a distant land of war and

peril, and could neither arrest nor avert the horrors that might impend. It was a terrible mood of mind for such a man to depart for foreign service in, and certainly, in comparison, Charlie Oliphant was to be greatly envied. He now wore the locket dated '10th July,' with Auriel's photo in it, and had treasured in his heart the last words he had heard her utter : 'Good-bye, Charlie—*dear* Charlie !'

These were indeed words to remember ; and if in any way entangled, surely she would never have spoken them. But if she loved him, what availed it, when half the world would lie between them, and the sweet passion that ripened at Abercairnzie had become, when viewed through the medium of time and distance, but as a summer flirtation after all ?

Charlie was not casuist enough to view the situation thus just then, and abandoned himself to 'the pleasures of hope,' vague though it was, as he drew his sword—the sword his father, Phadrig *Staur* of Dalhonzie, had drawn before him—and took his place in the ranks ; and, played out by the band of the Rifle Volunteers, the little column began its march, amid ringing cheers from their comrades at the barrack-windows and the crowd on the castle hill. And when the drums crashed, and the wild war-pipes struck up the quick step of the regiment, 'Hurrah for the Bonnets of Blue !' under that echoing archway, through which so many a king has ridden to hunt, to battle, and to glory—as he saw the lads in their tartan trews defiling forth, Charlie felt, unlike Duncan, that the brilliant romance of life was all before him yet—a glorious emotion in the heart of the young.

Down the picturesque High Street they came, followed by a vast multitude to whom they gave back cheer for cheer, while goodwill and honest sympathy might be read in the faces of all. What a crowd it was ! and many a mother was there to see off her son ; but there were no wives, for our soldiers are all so young now.

In time of peace, officers have often to look sharp after their men ; but in war-drafts no such precautions are neces-

sary, especially with such men as the Highlanders. So all was high enthusiasm, and many added their voices to the music of the band, making the lofty old houses re-echo again :

‘ It is gude to be merry and wise,
It is gude to be honest and true,
But better to stand by the old Scottish land,
And byde by the Bonnets of Blue !’

The railway station was soon reached, and the prosaic arrangements for departure by train were rapidly proceeded with by the authorities there, and the staff acting in concert. Eight soldiers with their arms and accoutrements were told off to each compartment ; and their knapsacks were placed under the seats. Anon all were in, and while the eager crowd without the station were cheering still, a single bugle sounded ‘ Attention !’ Then dead silence fell upon the departing band, and every head was withdrawn from the windows, while the train swept away from the station, beautiful Stirling was left behind, and soon even the Ochils began to sink in the distance ; then Charlie and Crawford, a heedless and handsome young fellow, betook them industriously to smoking, chatting, and much foolish merriment, while Daljarroch, who had procured a compartment for himself, sat sunk in thoughts—thoughts that went backward to days of sunshine long since passed, on memories sweet or bitter, for he seemed now to have lived a long life ; and then he brooded on the passionate yearning he had felt for a love that had never been his, and the ruin that had now come upon him.

Actually going to Afghanistan at last ! Well ! the world is only a small place after all, he tried to think philosophically. Does not Mallock tell us truly, that ‘ within less than a century, distance has been all but annihilated, and the earth has practically, and to the imagination, been reduced to a fraction of its former size. Its possible resources have become mean and narrow, set before us as matters of everyday statistics. All the old haze of wonder is melting away from it ; and *the old local enthusiasms*, which depended so largely on ignorance and isolation, are melting ; likewise

knowledge has accumulated in a way never before dreamed of. The fountains of the past seem to have been broken up, and to be pouring all their secrets into the present. For the first time man's wide and varied history has become a coherent whole to him.'—'All 'rue,' muttered Duncan, as he thought over these things, and looked wearily and dreamily out on the fast-flying landscape—'distance has in one sense been annihilated; but separation still exists, and is but a foretaste of death to the loving, the tender, and the true.' How he envied the light hearts of his men, when he heard their songs, choruses, and merriment, ringing out at times above the roar of the swift-rushing train.

He clung to the hope that, hearing, as she must do through the daily papers, of his departure, Augusta, become repentant and just, might relent and come to the place of his embarkation to bid him adieu—it might be, to take her place as his wife and the companion of the voyage.

Vain hope! The place of embarkation was reached; but there was no sign of Augusta, and Duncan's heart sank lower as hour after hour went by.

Amid all the bustle of Portsmouth—the grand naval arsenal of Britain and headquarters of the British fleet—and the enthusiasm of the embarkation of some six hundred men, detachments for various corps in India, with the bands playing 'Good-bye, sweetheart,' and so forth, the face of Augusta haunted him, with the unnatural state of the relations between them, and he failed to share in the emotions of those around him; and dreamily his eyes wandered over the long line of ultra-mural fortifications, the vast expanse of the majestic dockyard, the forest of masts, and the seemingly endless ranges of storehouses.

The huge Indian transport—the *Simla*—was ready for sea, with the blue-peter flying at her foretop; and the embarkation of the troops commenced at once by a gangway from the wharf, in communication with others placed fore-and-aft along the upper deck.

Vast quantities of stores of all kinds were still pouring on board, including tons of ice, that would prove very acceptable in the Red Sea, especially when steaming on its waters *with* the breeze ; and there were countless cases of shot and shell, baggage, and impedimenta of various descriptions.

To Charlie the scene was almost a new one. The soldiers descended to the lower deck by fifties at a time, where the warrant-officers allotted to each his place, and showed him where and how to hang his arms and accoutrements, and stow his bag and knapsack. This done, they would all have gladly returned to the upper deck, again to enjoy the bustle, the novel scene, and stare about them ; but the firm rule of discipline was tighter now, and they were ordered to remain below unless piped up by squads, and, worse than all, must not for a moment attempt to smoke !

However, they crowded to the port-holes, and out of them they stared and cheered to their hearts' content. Duncan and his two subalterns had a cabin to themselves, generals and field-officers alone having the right to an entire cabin.

A general-officer was going out in the *Simla*. All his traps, books, servants, and horses were already on board, and he did not come till next day—a thin, erect, wiry and martial-looking man, arrayed in his undress uniform, with ribbons on his frogged surtout, and with gilt scabbard and cocked-hat, at the sight of which the younger soldiers roared themselves hoarse, and waved their glengarries as he saluted all generally, and descended in state to his cabin.

Now that the tutelar divinity had arrived, all expected the clang of the ship's bell to announce the order to unmoor ; but then an unusual delay took place : several messengers were sent on shore to several departments—something was wrong, nobody knew what ; but when all were in suspense, the officer acting as adjutant of the united drafts summoned 'the first subaltern for duty,' who proved to be Charlie Oliphant.

A despatch was put in his hand, addressed to the Horse

Guards, whither he was ordered to convey it, and return with the answer without delay. He was not to lose time even by changing his uniform.

‘Sent to London on duty?’ exclaimed Cosmo Crawford, as Charlie made a few brief preparations in his cabin before starting; ‘I wish it was my luck.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there is a little girl in Eaton Square I should like to see just once again; and hang me, but it would go hard with me if I didn’t contrive to do so, spite the general’s haste.’

‘Just my case,’ said Charlie; ‘only the girl I wish to see lives in another quarter. But who is your fair one, Cosmo, if it is fair to ask?’

‘It is not; she is simply the girl I leave behind me.’

‘And why?’

‘Man alive!’ exclaimed Crawford, with a mock aggrieved air; ‘could I ask a girl who hangs out in Belgravia to share with me a sub’s bungalow up country, or, worse still, a tent among the Afghans? Even a villa at Simla would not content her.’

‘And you leave her trustingly till your return?’ said Charlie, with a bitter sigh as he thought of his own case.

‘My return! A girl like her, with ten thousand a year, will be picked up by some titled beast perhaps, long before that; so I must grin and bear it,’ added Crawford philosophically, as he lighted a cigarette; ‘but before that an Afghan bullet may have settled my haggis. Only think, Oliphant! She has three sisters all dowered like herself; a lovely sight it was to see the four, all in costume, at lawn-tennis. Fancy forty thousand per annum making the balls leap and fellows’ hearts too! The thought of that girl upsets me, so I’ll have a gentle tonic of brandy and soda. Ta—ta, old fellow; and a pleasant little trip to you.’

While Crawford chattered thus, Charlie had quitted the ship; and full of hope of perhaps turning this most unex-

pected stroke of good fortune, a trip to London, to some account, he took the express by the branch railway from Gosport, which joins the South-Western Railway at Bishopstoke, and about mid-day found himself for the first time in the modern Babylon.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN MAYFAIR.

WITH the duty that brought Charlie Oliphant to London—some mistake in routine, or some red-tape blunder—our story has nothing to do. Suffice it that his business at the Horse Guards was not speedily despatched, as he had to go to many departments, and ultimately was desired by the military secretary of H.R.H. the F. M. Commanding-in-Chief to appear at ten precisely on the morrow at the Horse Guards; but this was not till after he discovered the right office, and the remarkable density of the sentinels without, and of the officials within, as no one seemed capable of giving any information whatever on any point. The doubts of many as to where the particular office was, whether about Whitehall or in Pall Mall, caused Charlie much waste of time, and indulgence in a few sharp expletives, ere he could plunge into a hansom and found himself bowling westward, along Piccadilly, in the direction of Mayfair, with a somewhat confused sense of time, and of his own identity, and whether he was the same Charlie Oliphant who, but a short time before, had been amid the berths of the crowded *Simla* in the dockyard of Portsmouth.

And little could Charlie foresee all that was to happen by the time—or about the time—the clock at the Horse Guards struck ten upon the morrow!

The peculiarity of his uniform, with its trews of scarlet Stuart tartan and the claymore, attracted some attention in

the streets, thronged though they are from time to time by the motley and sometimes hideous costumes of the local volunteers in all shades of grey and clay colour.

The memory of the interrupted interview at the Fairy Rock, more than all the bouquet of withered flowers, and the tress of her hair which he wore in a locket, encouraged Charlie Oliphant to seek the presence of Auriel while lured to her by all the tender and passionate love that separation would now render hopeless ; and so far as her father the earl was concerned, there was no reason, he felt, why he should *not* make a farewell call, as he was so unexpectedly in London.

Was he not bound to do so in courtesy ! And yet his heart throbbed painfully as the hansom turned from Piccadilly up through Berkeley Square, and approached the somewhat dusky-looking Abercairnle mansion in Mayfair.

Had Oliphant been wealthy, even tolerably so, he would have addressed the earl boldly and formally, and not have gone about Abercairnle as if he meant to steal his daughter like a thief in the night ; but he had no control over circumstances, any more than over the impulses of his heart ; and there was no love lost between him and the earl.

Then his fears suggested that Auriel might be absent, visiting, shopping, driving, or out of town ; and if any of these contingencies occurred, the last chance that fortune seemed to give him would perhaps be gone for ever, and the morrow must find him inexorably on board the *Simla*.

A powdered valet, who was condescending to take a view of the world from the steps of the portico, informed Charlie, as he sprang from the hansom, that his lordship ' was hout—gone to the 'Ouse, indeed.'

A special meeting of Parliament had been called, with reference to Indian affairs principally ; but the earl had gone to Westminster in his place as Baron Birgham—that title so congenial to him—to oppose on Imperial principles, or to shelve, two Scottish Bills—that for the restoration of the

Secretary of State, and the erection of even one harbour of refuge on the dreadful east coast of Scotland, where there are none, and too probably will never be.

This patriotic peer had seen with grim satisfaction the departure announced of the detachment of the Albany Highlanders, with the names of the three officers, and thought that surely it would be odd if by shipwreck, pestilence, sun-stroke, or the bullet, he was not rid of a useless son-in-law, and of another who had the presumption to wish to become one.

‘So the earl is out—ah—is Lady Auriel at home?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then take up my card,’ said Charlie, already seeming to tread on air. Yet she might not be alone.

Auriel was in the drawing-room *alone*, and lost in thought. Such a triviality as the stopping of a hansom near the house was unheard by her, though an aged grey Scottish staghound, one of the grey dogs of Fingal—her peculiar pet, as a link with Abercairnie—that lay on a bearskin at her feet, cocked his ears and looked up.

Like the earl, she too had read the paragraph in the morning paper, and she was thinking—thinking very sadly. Her face, soft and beautiful as the Madonna of Sasso Ferrato, with drooping eye-lashes and sad yet dove-like smile, was cast down, and her hands, small and white as a snow-blossom, were folded in her lap.

Charlie was going now, she thought, never to be seen by her again, too probably, and—and as she looked up, he stood by her side, cap in hand!

‘Mr. Oliphant—how—how—here?’ she asked, with utter bewilderment, the moment the servant who had ushered him in withdrew.

‘By chance—good-fortune—the kind favour of heaven, I think, Lady Auriel,’ said he, speaking hurriedly and nervously, as he took both her hands for a moment and then relinquished them, ‘I was sent from the transport on a special

duty to the Horse Guards, from whence I have just come. I have to be there again at ten to-morrow, and then leave town for Portsmouth.'

The affairs of Duncan Daljarroch, fortunately for these two, gave them some neutral subject to converse upon, and enabled both to assume a little composure, which was to be speedily lost again. Charlie was both shocked and startled on hearing of the crash in Duncan's household, which he now learned for the first time, and thus had a clue to the bearing of his friend for some time past—a bearing which had been to him a source of much regret and mystery.

'I was certain that there was some quarrel,' said he, 'and that Lady Augusta had quitted the vicinity of Stirling.'

'Too true !'

'And the earl knows nothing of her whereabouts ?'

'She is not in Mayfair as yet,' replied Auriel in haste, and colouring slightly ; 'Fleurette is with her, and cousin Sidney has joined the Hussars at Aldershot—his leave was up.'

Then there was a moment's silence, while her eyelids drooped under the ardour of his gaze, for there was already between these two a sense of intimacy and companionship that might lead to anything.

'Auriel—Lady Auriel !' said Charlie, in a troubled voice ; she knew what was coming, and trembled violently.

Suddenly he drew her close to him.

'Auriel—Auriel !' he whispered, and kissed her. She drew back, and regarded him timidly, and with a pale face. 'My darling ! my darling ! pardon—but you love me, don't you ?'

'I think so, Charlie—there ! And you ?'

'Love you, Auriel ! God alone knows how passionately—how tenderly !'

All doubt had vanished now—time and place were forgotten. Her look, her eyes assured him, and tremulously and in silence she clung to him, and he, in silence too, pressed on her lips the long, pure, and reverent, yet passionate kiss of a first love,

while the devotion of a lifetime seemed to well up in the hearts of both.

Neither seemed to remember anything which had happened before that, and yesterday seemed to have been ages ago.

The talk of lovers does not read well and proves a little fatuous, if not quite incoherent, on paper ; 'For when a conversation,' as some one says, 'has a tendency to go round and round in a circle, the progress of the dialogue to any special conclusion, however fast the words may flow, can neither be marked nor rapid.'

'What have we done, Charlie—dearest Charlie,' said Auriel, in a sobbing voice, while nestling close to him, 'that we should be brought together thus—as if the hand of Fate was in it, as I am sure it is—to love each other as we do, and then—then to be parted in this horrible way ; parted for life—for life ! Oh, Charlie !' and her hot tears fell fast, while Charlie kissed them away, and called upon heaven and destiny—which were somewhere apparently in the chandelier, as he turned his eyes that way—to bear witness and record how true and unchanged they would both be till he returned from India.

'Then you never were engaged to your cousin Sidney?' he asked in one of their lucid intervals.

'Never—never ! though I often feared that you thought so.'

'Then what is, or was, the entanglement of which Daljar-roch gave me so many hints ?'

'Simply this, that by our uncle's will Sidney was to marry one of the two daughters of the Earl of Abercairnie, or his property—all save a very moderate income—passed to another heir when he was five-and-twenty. He cared most for Augusta, and might have married her ; but Sidney's means were too small to—to—meet the then requirements of papa. You see it all, Charlie, don't you ?'

It was an eccentric will, at least.'

'And has been the bane of my existence. But promise me, Charlie,' she added, in a cooing voice and manner, 'that once in each day—at one o'clock, we will say—you will take

out your watch and think of me for a few minutes, as I shall do the same, and think of you ?

‘ My own love, what need of that, when I shall be thinking of you always ?

‘ Promise me !’ she said impetuously.

‘ I promise faithfully, sweet one.’

And it almost seemed as if this superstition of the heart, old as the days when Famiano Strada wrote of his magnetic dial, soothed the girl for a time, till Charlie, glancing at the clock, heaved a deep sigh, and partly rose from her side.

‘ Not yet—oh, not yet !’ she said imploringly.

‘ I must, darling,’ said he, in a husky voice.

‘ Oh, Charlie !’ she exclaimed, sobbing, and clinging to him, ‘ I would that we were—we were——’

‘ What, Auriel ?’

‘ Both dead !’

‘ *Dead?*’

‘ Yes, Charlie ; dead and safe—in peace where no one could separate us !’

Instead of taking his departure, Charlie once more resumed his seat by her side on the sofa, drew her face close into his neck, and an interchange of sobs and so forth ensued, while a kind of trance came over both, and they were utterly oblivious of time, till the roar of a dinner-gong gave both a species of electric shock, and an apparition stood before them in the shape of the earl, riveted to the Turkey carpet apparently, speechless with indignation and astonishment—grim and stern, his china-blue eyes seeming literally to glare through the gold eye-glass that was balanced on his long thin nose ; yet his bearing was very calm, all things considered, as he would have deemed it ‘ bad form ’ to have given way to all that he felt ; but his face, delicately skinned and minutely wrinkled, like the cracks in an old portrait, and very pale always, was almost ghastly now.

‘ How is it that I find you here, sir, and thus—thus—with my daughter ? My daughter, for whose oblivion of—of—

d—me, I'll burst! I blush, while my heart bleeds with shame!

'Oh, pardon her, my lord! The fault is mine alone; I sought her presence——'

'For what purpose?'

'To bid her farewell. A chance was given me of doing so. I have dared to say that I love her,' he added, regarding with deep pity poor little Auriel, now utterly crushed and sobbing on the sofa, with a handkerchief pressed to her eyes.

'A strange love yours, sir—strange as it is presumptuous!' said the earl, loftily and sternly. 'Poverty, exile, and dependence are what you would offer my daughter on one hand, while luring her on the other from all that rank and wealth can accord. But I waste my time and yours in thus condescending to talk to you, sir! Begone from this house, ere I order my servants to throw you over a window!' he added, pressing his thumb on the knob of an electric bell.

Charlie did not wait to have any further affront put upon him by the passionate old man. He gave a glance full of love and pity at the crouching form of the golden-haired Auriel, and withdrew; and the tall, bulky hall-porter who opened the half of the great entrance-door, and bowed him out, could little have dreamt of the storm of mingled emotions that surged and whirled in the visitor's heart and brain.

Out into Mayfair, into sunny and bustling Piccadilly, he walked along mechanically as one in a dream, and strove to find a temporary solitude in the Green Park.

His whole soul revolted at the insult which had been put upon himself, and at the position of compromise with her father in which he had been compelled to leave his beloved Auriel while in the flush of her young love, and overwhelmed—all unsustained by hope—in the midst of a great sorrow. He panted like a weary harrier rather than breathed as he walked along. He could not pause to think—the time for such a luxury seemed indeed far off then.

Expelled from the house like some low intruder—he, Charlie Oliphant, and in the uniform of his grand old historical regiment, too !

The horrible affront, apart from the grief for what it brought about with it, confounded him, and roused his haughty Highland blood to boiling heat. How he had made his way down the stately staircase and out of the house, he never precisely remembered. He had a vague impression—but that might be fancy—of having been looked on wonderingly and inquiringly by some one—the valet probably who handed him his claymore ; but it all seemed to have happened years ago, or to some one else.

The air revived him as he walked under the trees ; but whatever might befall, she was lost to him now—lost for ever, when just won ! And could aught in life now be worth living for, or worth making an effort to win ?

The best half of Charlie's cigar fell from his moustached lip, bitten clean through by his sharp white teeth in his excitement, unconsciously. Then he selected another from his case, with an air of perfect coolness, scraped a match against an iron post, and lit it, and few who saw him could have imagined that he was blind with suppressed passion ; though, with his bent head and knit brows, he looked, to a close observer, like anything but a man under the proper influence of 'the soothing weed,' as he betook him to an hotel. And how he attempted to sleep that night, with the roar of the adjacent streets in his ear, may be supposed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TEN BY THE HORSE GUARDS' CLOCK.

HE was up early, and felt feverish and restless. A hundred times he was on the point of writing a farewell letter to Auriel, and another to the earl ; but whether it should be

defiant and upbraiding, or judiciously palliative for the sake of Auriel, he was undecided, and the time came when he was due at the Horse Guards without having written a line of either.

She 'was so near, and yet so far!' Could he but see her face and hear her voice once again, ere distance and the world of waters lay between them! And so with this craving on one hand, and a vague longing for some undefined species of vengeance on the earl for the vulgar expulsion to which he had subjected him, Charlie pursued his way through the sunny streets, down the steps near the Duke of York's column, and across the pleasant parade at the back of the Horse Guards, with its shady trees.

He was too much preoccupied either to notice or resent the *insouciant* bearing and scrutinising glance of the gigantic sentry in boots, breastplate and helmet, who barely condescended to 'come to his front and carry arms' to him as an officer of 'the Foot,' but made his way at once to the official, from whom he received his despatch for the general on board the *Simla*.

'And now a long good-bye to London,' thought he, as he turned into the archway, where still the giant sentinel was slowly treading to and fro, pausing in each turn to survey alternately Whitehall and St. James's Park, as if he expected to see some curious change in either.

At the west end of the archway, the figure of a young lady with the veil of her hat tied tightly over her face caught the eye of Oliphant.

'Charlie!' said a choking voice, and his heart gave a mighty throb.

'Auriel—you here? Oh, my darling!'

'You told me that you had to be here to-day at ten in the morning; and so at all risks I came, in the hope of—of——'

'My own—own Auriel!'

'In the hope of seeing you and apologising for the terrible conduct of papa yesterday.'

By this time her hand was clinging to his arm, and they were making their way instinctively from the vicinity of the crowd gathering to see the 'Guards mounted,' and across the parade towards the tree-shaded walks in the Park—withal a sorely public place for two so full of emotion as they were. At that moment even the affront of the expulsion was ceasing to rankle in Charlie's heart, though he was a proud and resentful Oliphant of the old and time-honoured house of Aberdalgie.

Holding her soft and tremulous little hands in his, and looking on her sheeny hair all golden in the morning sunshine, and into her eyes of violet-blue, as the longing to clasp her to his breast and hold her for ever there grew strong within him, for a moment he actually cared little whether the general ever got his despatch, or the *Simla* put to sea without him.

During the past night the girl had prayed often by her bedside, in a passion of tears. Now she was so accurately attired, and had made such a toilette, and her magnificent hair was so beautifully dressed, that no one could have believed that she had passed a night of sleepless misery.

Charlie lifted her veil, and silently regarded her face with a great intensity of expression ; and she replied by her sweet, tender smile—to him like no other smile in this world ; and while the touch of her soft, warm arm was thrilling through all his veins, like him, she was wondering ' what was to be *the end of it all !* '

Alas ! had they met but to part ?

' You know there is no help for it, Charlie,' said Auriel, in a broken voice. ' The time you are away may not be so long, and—and—we don't mind waiting, dearest ? '

' Not long ! ' repeated Charlie, whose mind, in his desperation, had been revolving in all sorts of odd resorts—even to getting married before a registrar.

Heavens ! what would the terrible earl have thought of such a resource ? But to take her with him thus, even were

she willing to go, was impossible, and would make a noise all over the world—the little world of England, or English society at least—and was not to be considered for a moment. But once he was out *there*—‘there’ meant India, a wide word—he would get on the staff—something might turn up, no one knew what ; but he would never cease to love, to think, and to pray for her and for their reunion. And all this, and a great deal more, did Charlie say, rather incoherently to be sure ; and Auriel listened, sadly, tearfully, and hopefully, for ‘youth at least is beautiful, and has hope ; its springs are yet unbroken ; it has *time*, if its first blossoms be blighted, to bloom again.’

How long they lingered in the Park, seeking the most sequestered seats, they scarcely knew ; but ever and anon Charlie, in his heart, blessed the general, the blunder, the red-tape office, and all the rest of it, that had sent him to London. And often they walked in silence, yet hand in hand, each with a vaguely defined sense (Auriel’s had in it a strange infusion of fear and mystery) that something new had come into their lives, which gave them a greater interest since they had met that morning, and made a veritable Eden of a place that is one of the most prosaic in London.

Could her proud and imperious father have seen her then ! But in the desperation of the time, and their mutual circumstances, with her lover, the daughter of the peer was, to some extent, as oblivious of the severe conventionalities of the society in which she moved, as if she had been the daughter of a peasant. She was to write to Duncan, and through him they could always hear of each other. Other arrangements as yet, for their future, they had none.

At last the perils of arrest and reprimand, the inexorable exigencies of life and of the service, began to dawn on Charlie’s mind, and the distant striking of the Horse Guards’ clock gave these form.

No one—no one was near, and she pressed her lips to his with a passion that, on after-thoughts, scared herself.

As Burns and his Highland Mary did—but not like them, Bible in hand—each promised in simple yet forcible, loving, and tender words, to be faithful and true to the other—faithful and true as if wedded in the face of the Church and before God. They exchanged rings—one more convulsive and clinging embrace when no eye saw—and parted with hearts that seemed to bleed, and the bitter consciousness that their paths in the world must now lie apart.

For how long? Time alone could show.

'Auriel, Auriel!' thought Charlie, as the swift train bore him away, 'but that I love you so dearly, I should have prayed God that we had never met and never known each other!'

Love of her, and the long separation and the doubtful future, afforded food for ample reflection; and times there were when he accused himself of being selfish and unjust in tying her fate up with his own, marring, it too probably might be, all her prospects in life—he, her *fiancé*—a species of husband, and yet no husband, from the solemnity of their mutual promise—one that would cast a shadow upon an otherwise bright existence.

Charlie was yet so young and full of life, that 'the joy in the mere fact of living would assert itself in defiance of all obstacles;' but for poor Auriel, she was to know the peace of girlhood no more!

Would she be faithful? It was difficult to doubt it, yet a lady novelist says that she has always thought 'that the intensity of a woman's faithfulness depends a great deal on circumstances: for instance, whether any other man of equal moral stature has laid real vigorous siege to her heart; whether her time was her own, in which she has nothing else to do but remember him, or whether the daily work that falls to her hand so engrosses her attention as to give her no time to form the habit of remembering.'

Another man would lay, and already had laid, siege to the heart of Auriel, though not very vigorously certainly. Her

time was all her own in so far as 'Society,' with its thousand contingencies and varied gaieties, did not absorb it ; and amid the brilliant and changing whirl of these it might be difficult to remember constantly the young Albany Highlander, who was facing, daily, death or wounds in the distant East, and still more difficult to adopt and retain the *habit* of remembrance to which the fair writer refers.

But, as we said before, time will show.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THROUGH THE 'GATE OF TEARS.'

BY ten next morning Charlie was watching from the poop of the *Simla* the chalky cliffs of the beautiful Isle of Wight as they seemed to sink and lessen on the starboard quarter, while the great transport with all her living freight steamed steadily and speedily down the widening waters of the British Channel ; and the deep and stirring reflection naturally occurred to his thinking mind, When should he see those cliffs again—if ever ? And what might—nay, must—have happened ere that time came to pass ?

These ideas, with all they suggested, and the utter vagueness and uncertainty of the future, had a somewhat depressing effect upon him for a time, and he rather envied the heedless jollity of Crawford and some other young fellows, who were chatting gaily, and seeming already quite at home with certain ladies who were going out, some to rejoin their husbands, and others on matrimonial views intent.

On returning to the ship, Charlie had lost no time in acquainting his friend Duncan—now so grim and changed—with a certain portion of Auriel's news, as if incidentally ; but saying nothing of themselves, nor did Duncan in his great preoccupation seem to care to inquire. In Charlie's departure

for the seat of war, the former thought the moth would be separated from the flame—a fortunate thing for the moth ; but though exceedingly well pleased, on one hand, to hear that Sidney St. John was at Aldershot, it was torture to know that *her* movements were involved in such mystery, and that she was neither at Mayfair nor Abercairnie.

Each strove to kill the time as best he could by close attendance to their military duties as prescribed for the service on board ship.

When captain of the day, Duncan had to visit the men's dinner-mess, the hospital, the guard, and sentries ; and Oliphant, when sub thereof, had to visit the breakfasts, dinners, and hospital also, see the grog served out, and at eight p.m. go round with a sergeant bearing a lantern, to see that every man was in his hammock and the lights extinguished, as none are allowed between decks unless in lanterns, and all smoking there is strictly prohibited. Moreover, sergeants of the watch (troops at sea are always divided into three) are placed on each side of the ship, near the quarter-deck, and one on each side near the fore-chains, and they are responsible for the cleanliness of the decks and the strictest observance of all orders.

So long as the least uncertainty remains, hope never can die in the human heart ; thus Duncan Daljarroch looked forward to letters or telegrams coming to him through France from Augusta. It could not be that she would ultimately let him depart on the perilous mission that now took him Eastward without one word of good wishes or of farewell.

Gibraltar, with all its cliffs and frowning batteries, was reached and left behind ; there were telegrams for several on board the *Simla*, but alas, not one for him !

Malta next, 'with its streets of stairs,' its crowded harbour and picturesque edifices, was also left behind ; but no letter *via* Marseilles had come from Augusta, nor was there one awaiting him at Suez. There was an epistle, however, from his sorrowing mother, full of blessings, tender messages,

and anxious hopes—nothing more : no news of the absent wife, or of the returned brother.

Poor Duncan could recall the time when his mother's *first* letter reached him in India, long ago, at Benares, and how hot and troublesome tears clouded his eyes for a time ; and he could but kiss the lines her beloved hand had traced nearly two months before. Now her letter, though welcome to his heart, seemed actually of secondary interest.

At Suez he wrote, imploring her to forget and forgive all Augusta had done ; to be a mother to her in his absence, and to leave no means untried to trace her out, ere she wrote him again.

' I now can do no more. God's will be done !' he muttered, as he dropped the letter in the bag to go ashore, with a prayer in his heart and on his lips.

In that wonderful voyage through the Red Sea, nothing seemed to excite his interest—even the new town of Ismaila, standing where, when last he passed that way, there had been but the dusty and arid desert. Now man's skill and energy have formed there an anchorage where lay the bed of some old lake of the prehistoric ages ; and where the wild Bedouin or Arab robber alone could be seen traversing the sandy waste, is now Ismaila, with its railway-station, post and telegraph offices, and in its principle square a beautiful garden, overlooked by the palace of the Viceroy.

Even at Aden a telegram might reach him ; but there came none, and in due time its high, dark, and sombre rocks, so long the stronghold of the most lawless sons of Ishmael, were sinking astern ; the Gate of Tears was left behind, and broad before the bows of the *Simla* rolled the bright blue tepid waters of the Gulf of Aden and the broad Arabian Sea.

On this occasion Charlie was officer of the watch, and, save for his meals, could never quit the deck ; while he had the guard and sentries to visit, and to report to the adjutant the name of any luckless fellow who might be late in turning up for duty, or caught asleep on the deck in the moonlight,

especially when in tropical latitudes, thus courting moon-blindness.

The voyage was a pleasant one, and the weather deliciously fine. The saloon cabin—even the poop was the scene of many a quadrille to the sound of the pipes or drums and fifes, for there was no regular band on board ; and after all fear of the *mal-de-mer*, with its consequent pale faces, was past, the ladies were nothing loth to have such smart young fellows as Charlie and Crawford, or their brother subs, for partners ; and there was one far from indisposed to console the former for the loss of any girl he might have left behind him, but just then Charlie's heart was invulnerable. However, there was always a great deal of promenading after sunset, and no little amount of tittle-tattle and flirtation, varied by music and singing, as there was a piano in the captain's cabin.

Among those going out was a fat little Parsee merchant in a high conical black cap, Khao Rummajee, who always ordered iced champagne 'galore' for the ladies, though he never drank any himself.

One day there was quite an event when the bold Cape of Guardafui, the most eastern point of Africa, was on the star-board beam, and the ship was under easy sail and half steam. A great shark, which had long been dallying with the bait, and had long followed the ship, because, as the sailors averred, it knew a soldier was dying in the hospital, swallowed the hook, and was triumphantly towed on board, hand over hand, amid the cheers of his natural enemies, the sailors.

Tremendously did the watery savage struggle with his captors, and lash his vast tail about with such force that the ladies clustered on the poop grew pale, and Charlie's fair friend, Miss Polly Gushington by name, nervously clung to him for support, while the sailors below were fain to give the monster a wide berth, for a blow from such a shark's tail would have broken the strongest man's leg. A stroke from

a hatchet ended the contest. The cook carried off some of the flesh, the doctor got the backbone for a walking-stick, and the boatswain had the jaws and head scraped and cleaned, to take home as a tasteful chimney-piece ornament for his wife at Gravesend.

We have referred to a soldier dying in the hospital. He was a young fellow of the Albany Highlanders, and a prime favourite with Daljarroch, and had suffered severe internal injuries by falling into the hold after the vessel left Malta.

A Cameron from the shores of Loch Eil, he had never seen more of the ocean than that long and narrow inlet between the Argyleshire mountains. A good, brave, and religious lad, he had no fear of death, but was haunted by a painful horror of finding a grave, not so much, he said, in the *duthaich chien*, or land of the stranger (words for which there are no equivalents in English, as they combine with them *distance* and *exile*), but in the ocean, and coffinless !

When his last hour was drawing near, he clung to the hand of Daljarroch, as he might have done to that of his nearest and dearest kinsman, and besought him to see that he was decently coffined after death, and not merely thrown overboard in a blanket ; and he told him of a strange dream he had, wherein he had seen his own funeral, or one that he was conscious was his own, passing through a long and lonely glen, near Loch Eil, to where a newly-dug grave lay in the fragrant heather beside a huge *clach-mhor* or battle-stone of other times ; but when near it, the coffin *opened*—he thought that his body fell out, and he awoke with a nervous start and a wild cry of terror which startled all in that part of the ship.

Duncan pledged his word to see him interred as he wished, and so the lad died peacefully, holding his officer's hand in his own till the last. The ship's carpenter made a rough coffin of some packing-boxes, and though the sailors were disposed to ridicule its substitution for the blanket or hammock generally used, the body was placed in it on a grating

at the gangway, with a couple of cannon-shot tied to the feet to sink it, and covered by a Union Jack as a pall.

All hands were piped to 'bury the dead,' while the troops were mustered by beat of the muffled drum ; and Charlie's servant, young Duncan Macdonald, who was the dead man's special comrade, stood at the head as chief mourner. Grouped near the captain, who read the burial service, all the officers were bareheaded and full of natural emotion at a ceremony so solemnly sad and impressive as a funeral amid the great waters, while the ship's bell tolled at intervals. Many of the ladies on the poop were in tears ; and when the order was given to 'slope the grating,' to four seamen who stood, two on each side of it, there occurred a very startling event, which sent many of the former shrieking to their cabins below.

The weight of the shot knocked out the foot of the frail coffin as it fell from the ship's-side ; thus it literally *opened* and floated away in the sunshine, while the body, with only a shroud to enfold it, vanished into the depths of the sea. So, as Duncan said, the wild and weird dream of Gillespie Cameron came literally true !

A gloom generally succeeds such an event as a funeral in the narrow circle of a ship, and on this occasion it possessed an unusually repugnant feature ; thus there was neither music nor gaiety in the after-part of the *Simla* for two or three days subsequently, and it seemed as if everyone spoke more softly and was more kindly disposed to everyone else for the time being.

But the fulfilment of a dream was to Duncan Daljarroch somewhat perplexing ; and he thought, 'Can such things be, and overcome us like a summer's cloud without our special wonder ?'

By this time the worthy Parsee Khao Rummajee had become seriously unwell, and a great horror possessed him lest he too should die, and have such a funeral at sea, instead of being disposed of according to the horrible funeral rites of his religion—rites of which we shall hear more anon.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MISS POLLY GUSHINGTON.

THIS young lady was being chaperoned on the outward voyage by a matron, not much her senior, who had been for three years a 'grass-widow' in the vicinity of Bayswater ; but as she was just then full of her own little affair with Spurrier Clank, of the Bombay Lancers, her pretty charge was left very much to her own devices on board the *Simla*. ■

She had a sweet and languid voice, with soft hazel eyes, curving dark eyelashes, and hair of a golden-brown tint that seemed—like Auriel's—pure golden in the sunshine. She was barely twenty, very handsome, and a practised coquette—one in fact by nature. Thus she was somewhat piqued on finding those *æillades*, so languishing and sparkling, which she had never before found fail to do execution, were lost alike upon Charlie and Daljarroch ; the former seemed invulnerable, and the latter unconscious of their existence. Yet she had contrived, even before the *Simla* was out of the Red Sea, to possess herself of Charlie's photo, his autograph and natal day for her birthday book, a confession of all his favourite flowers, fruits, music, authors, and tastes, which, singular to say, were all identical with her own !

But then acquaintance, even friendship, ripen so fast at sea, and on board a tropical steamer especially ; and almost daily—yea, hourly—she had him by her side, to touch up her sketches or give her suggestions.

'Your friend is very clever, Mr. Crawford,' she one day said in a *sotto voce* to Cosmo.

'Clever—I should think so. Crammed at Sandhurst, and all that sort of thing. Knows everything, from the construction of an ironclad to that of a mouse-trap, and from a torpedo to a spinning-top.'

'Well, none of these things are much in my way,' replied

the young lady, who seemed well used to this kind of flippancy.

‘And better still, he is rich as Croesus,’ added Crawford, with a mischievous twinkle in his handsome dark eyes, as he stroked his upper lip, where the moustache was provokingly slow in sprouting ; but he did so by imitation, or in practice for the time to come.

Then she tried to obtain from Charlie some information concerning Duncan, who was somewhat of a puzzle to her.

‘Your friend,’ said she, as they sat together apart under the poop awning, ‘has not yet reached the age of old fellowhood, and yet he is terribly grim and grave. Was he always so?’

‘No,’ replied Charlie.

‘Married—is he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah—I thought so!’

‘Why, and how?’

‘Well, an undefinable something told me so.’

‘You are acute,’ said Charlie, smiling into her bright upturned face.

‘And his wife?’

‘Is at home.’

‘As the lady says in the play, a husband cruising off the coast of Mexico is as good as no husband at all. I should not like a separation of this kind. Would you?’

‘Most certainly not!’ replied Charlie, as his thoughts flew to Auriel.

‘Anyway,’ continued the young lady, pursuing her favourite theme, ‘I suppose he didn’t marry his first love?’

‘Why do you think so?’

‘Because no man ever does—or woman either, perhaps—except in novels.’

‘Pray speak for yourself, Miss Gushington,’ said Charlie, thinking of himself and Auriel.

‘I meant men—and men only,’ said she ; ‘surely you don’t think I ever loved anyone?’

'Sooth to say, I never thought about it at all,' said he, laughing.

Her ripe red lip pouted a little. She had generally found that with young men, next to having them make love, the next thing was to *talk* about it in all its phases ; but she had found this a failure with Charlie, who never followed up her cue of the subject. While ever and anon that parting in the Park ; the hastily won kisses ; the tender, almost holy promises ; the sad, delicious episode in all its details would come vividly to memory—the past returned and the present fled. Had he possessed the pneumatic tube spoken of by believers in the doctrine of spiritual essences, he would certainly have flown through space to Auriel, as his thoughts and aspirations did.

He could but look upon the shining tress in his locket, and the tiny ring which he valued more than Solomon valued that by which he ruled Afreet and Jhinn, and then sigh as he looked at the long white wake of the *Simla* in the waste of waters astern. How little the girl that prattled away by his side, and was so lavish of her bright *willades*, knew the secrets or the real state of the heart of the young fellow she was seeking to entangle in her meshes—and pleasant meshes enough many would have found them.

Charlie, in obedience to Auriel's desire, never omitted to glance at his watch at one o'clock, or to wait for the hour, knowing that *then* especially, wherever she might be, *she* was thinking of him ; till once, when chatting with Miss Gushington, he was lured into forgetfulness, and the ship's bell struck two ! Mechanically he drew forth his watch, and to his astonishment found it had stopped at *one*. Here was a cause for terrible surmises, and to rouse all the superstition of the heart, in a Scotsman especially, amounting almost to an indication of calamity.

The remarks of the young lady, when repeated to Duncan, failed to elicit the faintest smile from him, but rather gave his brow a deeper knit.

‘The girl is not such a fool as she looks,’ said he; ‘but so far as beauty goes, there are not many such girls to be found in that most odious of all markets, the Anglo-Indian marriage one, towards which she is hastening no doubt to escape a bread-and-cheese marriage at home.’

‘How cynical you are, Duncan.’

‘Mothers send their best-looking girls there by scores yearly, just to pick up husbands; and ere long they come home as grass widows, to add to the world of scandal at Brighton, Bath, and elsewhere. I have been out before, and know the system well.’

Perhaps it was the thought of his own self-made ‘grass-widow’ which galled him just then, for he was smoking furiously, as if to drown reflection or remembrance—so furiously that the dense eddies from his cigar rolled round him, and the broad butt of it burned red in the white glare of the sunshine.

In the cabin below, the young lady referred to continued to monopolise Charlie in many ways that evening, and kept him by her side to turn the leaves of her music while she sang to him—or ‘at him,’ as Duncan said; and one of her ditties was a pretty pointed one, for the last verse said:

‘A smile! a tear! The sun through rain—
For if we parted how you’d miss me!
You won’t go “sitting out” again?
There’s no one looking—darling, kiss me!’

Her eyes, half thrown backward, met Charlie’s for a moment swiftly, and then were cast down; while Duncan looked grimly, sadly, and half contemptuously on. He began to think that perhaps Charlie had got over his fancy for Auriel; and while supposing it was all for the best, he did not like him the more for it. On the other hand, Charlie was not guilty—even in momentary thought—of treason to Auriel, the girl whose pure yet passionate love filled him with gratitude and joy; yet it *was* difficult to play a part with such an effusive young lady as Miss Polly Gushington.

'Do take me on deck, please,' she said imploringly and suddenly to Charlie, after her song was ended. 'Mrs. De Tomkyns Browne' (naming her chaperon) 'is there. The cabin is stifling ; and I can never have enough of the lovely Arabian moonlight.'

A large knitted Shetland shawl, silky and soft as 'the woven wind,' was thrown coquettishly over her head and shoulders, its gathered folds held under her dimpled chin by a lovely hand that shone white as snow in the moonlight, and was wonderful in its perfect symmetry, as the owner thereof very well knew.

Though gradually becoming used to the purity of tropical skies, Charlie thought he had never seen such a brilliancy of moonlight. The stars seemed to be overhead in millions ; but all their splendour paled before the silver glory of the Arabian moon. The rigging shone in some places with a silvery sheen where gemmed by the soft dew, and some restless little brown sea-birds were tripping along the surface of the shining sea, as if a new day had broken. There was an icy splendour in the lovely light, yet the atmosphere was warm, even close and almost breezeless ; and nowhere over all the vast expanse where sky and ocean met, was there the vestige of a cloud, even so much as 'a man's hand.'

The ship was steaming steadily on before the soft wind ; her topsail and spanker were set with a head-sail or two, all gleaming snow-white, save where gently rounded off in shadow, in the light of the moon. The watch in their grey great-coats loitered in listless groups, looking over the side, chatting and smoking, or eyeing the long white wake astern, that indicated the way home to 'Old England,' Britain, or 'Europe,' as we always say in the colonies—the East more especially.

The ceaseless revolutions of the screw, the uncertain lights gleaming redly upward from the engine-room, made some inclined to dream and drowse ; while others, a couple here and there, on Jacob's ladder, or under the break of the poop,

were utilising the time, like Captain Clank and Miss Gushington's chaperon, pretty little Mrs. De Tomkyns Browne, who wore her hair frizzed and cut across, and had left her photo in every second shop in Bayswater and Regent Street.

'Oh no; as I said before, one can never have too much of this lovely moonlight!' exclaimed Miss Gushington, as Charlie settled her on one of the deck sofas, put a hassock under her pretty feet, and adjusted the Shetland shawl, which was ever and anon dropping from that glossy compact little head, and requiring to be deftly replaced, and by him of course.

And more than once her bracelet seemed to get hopelessly entangled in the said shawl, requiring all Charlie's skill to get it free; and thus a pretty hand that more than once came in contact with his own, and much of a dazzling taper arm, seemed somehow to be necessarily shown.

'And your regiment is in the Khoorum Valley?' she observed, after a pause, referring to a previous conversation.

'When last we heard of it—yes.'

'And you go, of course, by Benares and Lahore?'

'Yes.'

'How pleasant!'

'Why?'

'Papa is stationed there on the staff, and we go so far together.'

'Indeed!'

'What a cold and ungallant reply! Why don't you go into raptures at the prospect?'

'Why should I?' said Charlie, a little obdurately, considering the sweetness of the voice that addressed him, and of the face that looked upward to his.

'Oh—I forgot,' she exclaimed, pouting.

'What, Miss Gushington?'

'That you are so unimpressionable by nature and habit—perhaps a woman-hater.'

'God forbid,' said Charlie, laughing; 'but what makes you suspect so?'

'Your cold indifference to—to all the ladies on board. But,' she added coyly, 'the ring you wear might have assured me that you are not what I thought.'

'The ring I wear—which?' he asked.

'*This* one. A lady's, is it not?'

'Yes.'

'Now, Mr. Oliphant, of what flirtation is it the trophy?'

She took his hand within her own, and deliberately turned Auriel's ring round upon his little finger, for which it was a world too tight, thinking that before they reached Lahore another might be substituted for it, if she played her cards judiciously.

'It is the trophy of no flirtation, but the memorial of one who cannot be made the subject of a jest now,' said Charlie, with mingled gravity and tenderness of tone—perhaps with some annoyance too.

'Good; she is dead then!' thought Miss Gushington; 'but what a dear sentimental fellow he is. I must console him; his heart is evidently one that can be worked upon, and is worth winning.'

And to change the conversation, which had taken, she thought, an unexpected turn just then, she said:

'I had a cousin who died of fever in the Khooram Valley. Poor Dolly! he was in the Rifles, and to the notice of his death there was oddly added, "Fiends at a distance, please notice," the printer having omitted the *r*; but I can't smile at that even now, for I—we were all so fond of Dolly! He could ride to hounds and clear a bullfinch like a bird; leap, fence, box, swim, play cricket, croquet, and everything; but that odious cholera ended all.'

'Ah, indeed, poor fellow!' remarked Charlie, in an absent manner, and another pause ensued.

She had brought him on deck in the moonlight with a decided purpose in her mind, to take advantage of the time and their isolation at sea, to entangle him in a flirtation at least; but her ruse, aided though it was by *willades* usually

deemed very thrilling, and many a pretty action of the hands—for the girl was full of graceful tricks of manner—seemed likely to fail. At last she said, almost pettishly :

‘ How preoccupied you are !’

‘ Am I ?—surely not.’

‘ I [hope I did not refer to any sorrowful subject when jesting about your ring? If so, I should never forgive myself.’

‘ Far from it.’

‘ Then,’ said she, looking up at him shyly and waggishly, ‘ you are not in love with anyone, or perhaps never can be.’

‘ I could not be so ungallant as to say so to you.’

‘ Why to *me* ?’ she continued, taking very decidedly the initiative.

‘ Or to anyone. Love is not to be lightly spoken of, however.’

Her lashes fell for a moment ; then seeming to bend her eyes dreamily on the far horizon, she said in a low, concentrated voice, as if speaking to herself :

‘ I fear I am too full of enthusiasm ; “ Love me,” says Lady Godiva to Hereward, the last of the English ; “ let me feel that one thing loves me on earth. I must love ! I must have it ; and if God and His mother and all the saints refuse their love, I must turn to the creature and ask it to love me, but for a day.” Then a blush suffused her cheek, for this little actress actually possessed the power of blushing at will apparently, as she added : ‘ I was only quoting Bulwer Lytton ; but it must be delightful to love and be beloved again, as we read about in novels ; don’t you think so, Mr. Oliphant ?’

What reply Charlie was about to make to this pointed speech, and the effective glance that accompanied it, we know not, as there was a sudden exclamation from the groups on the poop, and all rushed to one side to see—what?

Only a shoal of flying-fish glittering beautifully and prismatically in the moonlight, shooting out of the bank of one

long blue glassy roller into the bank of another, with a sound as of a shower of pebbles falling on the water.

This appearance disturbed the conversation effectually so far as Miss Gushington was concerned, as a group gathered about her and Charlie, and a discussion ensued as to whether the said fish flew straight, or in and out, or high enough, as some aver, to fall on a ship's deck, and so forth. An opportunity was lost, and how or when would she be able to lead up to the point so effectively again?

She conceived that this wretched episode had perhaps changed the whole current of events, while Charlie, sooth to say, had never thought about their current at all.

So preoccupied was he with the thought of Auriel, that he was not quite conscious how much this flighty and flirting beauty ran after him, and appropriated him, dressed for him, sang for him, etcetera, till the 'chaff' of Crawford and others roused his ire, which only made them laugh the more.

'He wears a girl's ring,' said Miss Gushington to her chaperon, as they were disrobing in their cabin at night.

'A bit of vanity, my dear, no doubt,' replied the other, curling her forelocks over her slender fingers, and admiring herself immensely in her mirror.

'And I think he is too full of his profession to be a marrying man,' continued Miss Gushington.

'Believe me, my dear Polly,' said Mrs. De Tomkyns Browne, 'there is not one of these fellows who would hesitate for an instant, as Whyte Melville says, "to abandon his visions of military distinction, and link himself, his debts and his moustaches, to the fortunes of a pretty heiress."'

'But I am not an heiress,' said Miss Gushington, with a little impatient sigh.

'How does he know? Surely you have not been such a little donkey as to hint how the land lies!'

'But that ring?'

'Oh, bother the ring! He is a Scotsman; and I don't think, so far as I know, that Scotsmen go in for treasured

locks of hair, rosebuds, gloves, and sentimental flummery. He may be good or bad, but I dare say, my dear, you would find him in most things just like the rest of his sex.'

'Truth to tell, I have allowed myself to get too fond of him; but he is indeed a lovable fellow.'

'A dreadful mistake for you to think so, especially when he seems so indifferent.'

'It is this very indifference that piques me!' exclaimed the girl angrily, as she knotted up her magnificent hair with her quick little fingers. And then she tried to console herself with a suggestion of her chaperon, that Charlie was perhaps *not* so indifferent to her as he seemed; but might be content to be a silent lover simply because he couldn't afford to be a husband, 'even with batta and tentage, and all that, you know, my dear,' added the little grass-widow, warming woman-like, in spite of herself, towards what might become a love affair, though flirtation had been the daily business of *her* life at Bayswater—yea, ever since poor Browne had seen her ship steam homeward, between the Sandheads at the mouth of the Hooghly—and a pretty comprehensive business she had rendered it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE ARABIAN SEA.

MISS POLLY GUSHINGTON was right in her conception that Charlie was an enthusiast in his profession, but with that enthusiasm he had now entwined the thought of Auriel.

Next night he was officer of the watch; the moonlight was beautiful as ever, and the weather calm and delightful; but to evade or avoid such a *tête-à-tête* as that of the preceding evening, he smoked his cigar on the bridge, where, after a time, he was joined by Crawford.

Prior to that, he would hear from time to time the un-

doubtedly sweet voice of his would-be enslaver, as she sang in the great cabin ; but it did not prevent his mind from dreaming—the time and place, the silence and the sea, were so conducive to it.

His thoughts were running riot amid the romance of war ! He was an Albany Highlander, and would not have changed places with the Prince of Wales. Not he ! he would soon be going to the front—soon be face to face with those Afghans ! Auriel would yet hear of him, was the ever-recurring thought ; and that cold-blooded, insolent earl, too, might yet be made to blush for the gross and vulgar affront put upon him in Mayfair !

Dreamer-like, while looking back with tenderness to love and Auriel, he also looked forward with ardour to the life that was before him, and all that must inevitably be done ere he could meet her again—the parade, the pomp of war ; the picturesque bivouac, the tented camp in a wild and savage land overlooked by the Hindoo Kush ; the lonely watches of the night ; a bayonet charge by day, while the shrill pipes made the welkin ring to the ‘onset’—a certain young lieutenant, claymore in hand, and already grasping the V.C. he was yet to hang around the neck of her who was at home—the glorious bayonet-charge which was to be detailed by ‘our own correspondent’ and be depicted by ‘our own artist,’ who perhaps was at the time in Fleet Street. And so, as he smoked on, his ardent fancy pictured in the future ‘that impossible romance, worth all the material possibilities that have ever been accomplished.’

From his dreams he was aroused by a thump on the shoulder and the cheery voice of Crawford.

‘You seem sunk in a brown study, old fellow ; but I have come to help you to keep your watch, and save you from peril.’

‘What peril ?’

‘The Gushington. In fact, the Albany Highlanders can’t afford to lose you, Charlie.’

‘Nor shall they, yet awhile.’

‘But, by the way, did you not seem to be making your innings with her last night?’

‘Not at all!’ said Charlie, emphatically; ‘never thought of such a thing.’

‘Even in fun?’

‘Not even in fun.’

‘To us it seemed as if you were getting on like a house on fire.’

‘I envy your flow of spirits, Crawford. Moonlight at sea makes me reflective and thoughtful—even sad.’

‘And this is as bright as that of Naples, which the witty Marchese Caracciola used to say was worth three London suns.’

‘There is a grandeur in our utter loneliness, Cosmo; here we can realise what very probably Coleridge never did—the “painted ship upon a painted ocean”—the beautiful sameness broken, ever and anon, only by the gleaming phosphorescent track, it may be of some strange monster in the water; and then we are apt to think of all the cruel sea has swallowed up—the treasures lying in vast argosies that have gone down in storm or battle, and the jewels and dead men’s bones that have been lying together for ages, till an eerie feeling, as we say at home, creeps over us. Have you ever felt this, Cosmo?’

‘Not a bit! but I have often felt deuced sick of the sea in more ways than one,’ replied the matter-of-fact Crawford. ‘But what’s the row on deck? Something is in sight which I can’t see—one of your strange monsters, perhaps.’

They quitted the bridge and got on the poop, upon which all the cabin-passengers and officers from the mess came swarming now, roused, and not a few startled, by the blowing off of the steam, the throwing of the foretopsail in the wind; then the great propelling screw ceased to revolve, and the *Simla* lay-to, heaving on the long glassy rollers, while all on deck crowded to the side from which a boat was to be sent.

‘Where is it? What is it?’ was asked on every hand.

'Something floating in the water,' said the naval officer in charge of the deck.

'Something—what—where?' was asked impetuously by many voices, while the captain commanded silence.

'Where is it, Mr. —?' he asked of the lieutenant.

'There away to windward, sir,' replied the latter, handing the captain his night-glass; 'it looks like a boat adrift, about a mile off.'

'And a boat it is!'

'Anyone in it?' asked Daljarroch.

'Not visible, if so,' replied the captain; 'pipe away the crew of the starboard-quarter boat, and overhaul it, whatever it may be.'

'Quick, my lads! stand by the fall tackle!' cried the boat-swain. 'Lower away!'

The rattle of the ropes running quickly through the davit-blocks followed, amid the splash of the boat as it touched the water with an even keel; and then came the measured stroke of the oars, as they flashed with silver-like blades in the sparkling sea, when the boat shot off from the ship, with a middy in the stern, seated between the yoke-lines. All eyes on board followed her with breathless interest, and Charlie felt an arm slipped through his as Miss Gushington, in the excess of her excitement, clung close to him—so close, that her head nearly drooped on his shoulder.

The boat's crew soon overhauled the object of their search, and much diversity of opinion ensued amid the watching groups, while the ladies monopolised all the officers' binoculars and field-glasses; but ere long the boat was seen returning, in greater haste apparently than it had departed, the crew laying out on their oars with hearty goodwill, and nearly lifting the craft out of the shining water at every stroke, in their earnestness.

In the drifting boat—for such it was—they had found, almost senseless and half dead by exhaustion and exposure, a man supposed to be a Lascar, and two boys, the survivors of

a native ship, from the Persian Gulf, and from Gwadel Bay on the coast of Beloochistan last, bound for Bombay, but which had foundered in a gale by springing a leak.

The crew had betaken themselves to their boats, all of which parted. That now found had been manned by five other men, all of whom had perished of hunger, thirst, and delirium ; and the three survivors had now been adrift for twenty days and nights, with a supply of food for only four days, and no water save the dew from heaven.

They were placed at once in the hands of the doctor, and, amid the commiseration of all on board, the ladies especially, conveyed to the hospital, while the head-sails were filled again, the boat hoisted in, the screw began to revolve as before, and the great ship stood once more upon its course.

The castaways were of course a nine days' wonder on board, and little by little the story of their sufferings became known, and the interest in them was considerably increased at this crisis when it became known that the supposed Lascar was in reality an Afghan, named Abdoollah Khan, who had been taken prisoner by the Beloochees and sold into slavery, as they do with all whom they take in their incursions ; but he had escaped, and on board this fatal ship had hoped to reach the coast of India.

The sufferings of him and his companions had been terrible, and his once stalwart and powerful frame had been reduced to a mere skeleton, by exposure to the scorching sun by day and the baleful dews of night, enduring such dread and mental agony upon the *Kala-pawnee*, or Black Water, as no other landsman can conceive, while every device which poor human nature, gnawed by the most dreadful craving to satisfy its natural wants, could resort to, had been tried by turns.

Ere the survivors had been reduced to three, the crew of this boat had chewed lead to moisten their parched throats, and fought like wild beasts over a jelly-fish which Abdoollah had caught ; they had eaten their boots — sought to kill each

other, inviting death, and drunk the blood from the wounds their knives inflicted.

Lots had actually been cast for a victim to be devoured, and the doom fell upon a boy—one of the rescued—whose father in his madness attacked the others with his knife, and in the conflict that ensued he and four others fell overboard, and perished helplessly ; and every way their whole narrative was one of the most dreadful ever related by any of those whose career it is to 'do business on the great waters ;' and the Afghan, a Suni or orthodox Mussulman, thanked God in his prayers very devoutly for having spared his life.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE AFGHAN.

WHEN Abdoollah Khan was able to come on deck, he was the observed of all observers, and an object of special interest to the Highlanders, and all those who were bound for his native land, and to fight against his people. Clad as yet in their flowing garments and with the peculiar high-crowned cap of the Beloochees, his late masters, and with his unkempt hair flowing to his shoulders in their fashion, he was a remarkable figure on the deck of the *Simla*.

Like the most of his race, he was very tall, muscular, and spare in person, with a free manly bearing, and somewhat the air of a horseman. His nose was aquiline, his cheekbones high ; his face was a long one, and he was much less swarthy than a Hindoo. His eyes were black, like his hair and long beard, but keen and piercing as those of a mountain eagle ; and according to his native custom, the middle of his head was shaved.

A slash on one cheek, and the blue grains where he had been scorched by coarse powder on the other, showed that he had seen some fighting in his time ; and indeed he made

no secret of it, that he had fought with our troops more than once, in skirmishes near Peshawur and Jelalabad.

Though a fine stately fellow, neither Miss Gushington nor her chaperon could understand Charlie's interest in him; while the latter lady stigmatised him as 'a mere nigger;' but she would freely have applied that general term alike to Scindiah, Holkar, or Yakoob Khan.

He seemed a man who had been educated in his way. He spoke English moderately well, but with a thick guttural accent; and when addressed by Daljarroch in somewhat indifferent Pushtu, his dark and sombre countenance brightened with genuine pleasure: and though the conversation that ensued between them was rather polyglot in its nature, we may plainly render it thus:

'How long were you in Beloochistan?'

'Too long for a free Afghan warrior, yet not long enough to become a helpless slave of the Beloochee dogs! I was eighteen long months, sahib, pining for my wife and children, our black tents and the herds by the Logur river.'

'How did you fall into their hands?' asked Daljarroch, proffering his tobacco-pouch to the Afghan, who bowed his thanks and filled his pipe.

'They took me by surprise in the Bolan Pass, and carried me into the Brahuick mountains. Then I was sold as a horse-keeper to a Luri of Mekran, and Allah alone knows the life I led!' he added, spitting his hatred, for the Luris—a species of Persians—are deemed in the East the most detestable of the human race in principles and in practice, without any idea of religion, believing that man is only born to live, die, and be forgotten.

'And you escaped?' said Oliphant.'

'I had no weapon save this,' said he, producing a huge clasp-knife from the folds of his dress, while a savage gleam came into his eyes that seemed to become blood-shot as he spoke; 'but it found a passage to the Luri's heart, and, *Alh'mdillah!*' (Praise be to God!) 'almost ere his black

soul—if he had one—left the wound, I was on his fleet horse and away—away by the red sandy desert of Beloochistan—an awful place, sahibs. It is entirely a mighty waste of fine red shifting sand, furrowed like the waves of the sea we are sailing on when swept by a storm, and in some places the ridges are like brick walls with deep hollows between. There my horse perished, choked amid the sand ; but a draught of his blood refreshed me, and I struggled on and on till I reached Gwadel Bay near Ras Nu. And after the ship I sailed in perished, I had to endure again nearly all that I had done in the red desert of the Beloochees ; but *la ilaha illa 'llaho !* he added, meaning : ‘ There is no god but God.’

He was intensely anxious to learn some Afghan news, of which he had heard none while in captivity ; and he listened greedily when told of Shere Ali and Yakoob Khan ; of how the Russian Mission had been withdrawn from Cabul, and a British one was about to take its place.

He seemed interested to hear—and rubbed his hands while he did so—that the Ameer, Yakoob Khan, convinced by the recent campaign of the utter worthlessness of his standing army, was about to return to the old feudal system of irregular levies, to be supplied by his landholders, in proportion to their importance and wealth.

He had no love for the Feringhees, less still for the Russians, and he madly loathed the Beloochees, believing them all to be intruders where they were not wanted.

A sportsman ‘ to the backbone,’ he spoke with enthusiasm of hunting the lion, the tiger, the panther, and hyæna among the lonely mountains, the deep savage gorges and innumerable water-cuts ; and of hawks trained and untrained, for falconry is a favourite sport with all Afghan chiefs and gentlemen—all of which was listened to by Charlie with pleasure as a Highlander.

But the heart of Abdoollah seemed to sink, his dark countenance fell, and his voice broke, when he thought or spoke of the vast distance that lay between Bombay, the port

to which they were bound, and his native country, more than a thousand miles through Jodpore and Bekoneer ; while the other and still longer route by rail was more impracticable to a penniless stranger, and the strong man well-nigh wept as he saw the hopelessness of ever again being with his wife and children. 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin ;' so Charlie sympathised with him, and was struck with a sudden idea.

He would require a native servant—more than all, a man to look after his horse and baggage—after he landed ; why not take the Afghan if he was willing, and thus the poor man would easily find a way to his native country, as the detachment was going direct to the Khoorum Valley ?

When the proposition was made to the mountaineer, there came into his long grave face a strangely proud and scornful smile, an expression very different from the cringing one of the slimy Hindoo ; but it rapidly changed to one of pleasure and gratitude, and raising one brown hand to his cap in salute, he presented the other to Charlie in token of gratitude and acquiescence, saying in broken English :

'Sahib, Inshahat Allah' (God wills it). 'You may command me ; from this hour my life is at your service, and to it I will be faithful—by the souls of my wife and our little ones, I shall !'

And from that moment Charlie had personally no reason to regret the proposal, though Abdoollah Khan was certainly useless on board the *Simla*, and an object of no great admiration to his soldier servant, Donald Macdonald, who was slow in becoming used to such a strange compatriot, for Donald had his prejudices 'anent' colour. He was a pure Highlander in blood, though born in India, and in his antecedents had never known what civil life was—or life out of the Albany Highlanders. His father, a veteran grenadier of the corps, had fallen at the storming of Kotah. His mother bore him in a tent among the wounded. The first sights to which his eyes became accustomed were the plumed bonnets

and red tartans of the corps; the earliest sounds his ears knew were the skirl of the pipes, the sound of the bugle, and the crash of the drum on which he beat, till his sixteenth year, when he exchanged it for a musket; and, with certain differences incident to position, such too had been the life of Charlie and his father before him.

'You are one of the oddest fellows in the service!' said Crawford, when he heard of this new domestic arrangement. 'How can you take a fancy to an unknown nigger, picked up at sea, too?'

'He is picturesque-looking at least, and an object of compassion,' urged Charlie.

'Picturesque! To me he seems the beau-ideal of a very energetic and melodramatic scoundrel—with his curiously coloured hair, his hawk-like eyes, his fierce and sabre-gashed face. He has the very look of a robber, and would cut your throat as readily as he does those kabobs for his dinner with that ugly jack-knife.'

'You judge of him with unfounded prejudice.'

'Moreover, the man is an Afghan!'

'For that reason I am taking him home to his country, which otherwise he might never reach.'

'All the better for the country; besides, the fellow will be a spy in camp, and when he sees his native hills, may hook it, and leave his knife in your body, or some one else's!'

Eventually Cosmo was not far wrong in some of his suspicions.

'And how about his rank of khan? It means something, does it not?'

'It means chief; but Daljarroch says, that up there——'

'Where?'

'In Afghanistan, it is used pretty much the same as *Mr.* is with us.'

'Well, I shall be pleased when I see the last of your valet, Mr. Abdoollah!'

But the engagement of the latter as Charlie's servant, led

to a curious discovery a few days after. When in the act of cording up some of his master's baggage, Abdoollah laid his clasp-knife on the cabin-table, where the eyes of Daljarroch chanced to fall upon it.

The moment they did so, he started and perceptibly changed colour. He took up the knife, examined it; and as he held it, his hands trembled, for if further evidence of his recognition of it were wanting, on a little silver label on the handle was the name: *Will. Daljarroch, from Duncan.*

That identical knife he had, in boyhood, given to his brother Willie!

'How came you by this?' he asked Abdoollah.

'It belonged to a Feringhee soldier, sahib,' replied the Afghan, standing erect and saluting the questioner.

'A soldier who was supposed to be killed by the Afreedies?'

'There was no supposition in the case, sahib. I was among the Afreedies, and the soldier was killed by *me!*'

'Impossible! the man is now alive and well, at home in his native country.'

Abdoollah shook his head.

'If I had not killed him by a juzail shot, he would have killed me. I slew him with my own hand, and moreover saw him buried.'

'Buried!'

'Yes; but the *Ghoule Biaban* dug him up again, and it was after that I found the knife. The *ghoule* had rent his garments to devour him.'

Abdoollah here referred to one of the darkest and most universally-believed-in Afghan superstitions, that the mountains and deserts of their country are inhabited by a lonely demon, called by them the *Ghoule Biaban*, or 'Spirit of the Waste,' a being of vast proportions and frightful aspect, who devours any wayfarer he finds; who makes the mirage of the desert to deceive and lure travellers to their doom; who haunts burying-grounds, and disinters the dead to devour them.

'And did you bury the soldier again?' asked Duncan, after a pause.

'No, sahib.'

'Why?'

'Lest the ghoul should come upon me; and when I passed that way again, the body was gone.'

To Duncan it seemed possible that Willie might have been buried in a trance, disinterred by jackals whom some circumstance had scared, after which he had recovered, and made his way back to Scotland; or a comrade to whom he had lent his knife might have been slain in the manner described by Abdoollah. But that the man who had presented himself to Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett was the lost heir, the proofs he brought, and the other verbal evidence he adduced, left not a doubt on the mind of Duncan, and he supposed that by this time he was duly installed in possession of all their father had left.

He asked Abdoollah to sell him the knife; but though offered a sovereign for it, the Afghan haughtily declined, saying he did not deal in wares like a man in a bazaar; but would the sahib accept it as a gift from his hand?

'To you and all on board this ship I owe my life, sahib; take the knife—you are welcome,' he added.

Duncan felt deeply interested, and very much perplexed by this episode; he questioned Abdoollah Khan repeatedly, but he could learn no more than what he had simply told him.

The captain briefly—apropos of his interest in the relic—hinted at what Charlie already knew through Auriel; but to congratulate him on the safety and return of a dissipated brother was as difficult as to condole with him on the terrible monetary loss that event entailed, so he could but take refuge in silence; and, indeed, the now changed and reticent Daljarroch did not seem to court sympathy on that or any other subject.

Since their departure, Duncan had not been worried by a haunting consciousness he had, when at home, that people

must know all about his brother's return, his change of fortune, and Lady Augusta's mysterious absence. Things 'got about'—nobody knows how—through servants or other silently-observant folks; thus, if two men whispered together, Duncan had felt the colour rise to his face, as he thought they must be talking about him and his affairs.

There was no dread of that on board the *Simla*. The old world and the old life were a thousand leagues away, and more than ever was he now to find his home under the colours of the Albany Highlanders.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE REGIMENT.

AND now while the stately *Simla* stands on her Eastern course through the Arabian Sea, in stormy weather and in calm weather; when with a long heaving swell rolling up from the mighty Indian Ocean, each wave seeming to rise more high and fierce than its predecessor; while the transport steamed on amid the darkness with a light in her fore-top, or in weather when all was softness and sunshine; while Miss Gushington seeks to entangle Charlie, who is a man of one thought, and that thought is Auriel Menteith; while her giddy chaperon improves the shining hour with Spurrier Clank, and Daljarroch broods over his curious fate and the strange episode of Abdoollah Khan, who is brooding in his turn, but of vengeance on the dark-skinned Beloochee robbers—the while all this is passing, we say, we shall briefly tell the story of the regiment to which our heroes belong, and in the career of which we hope to interest the reader.

Charlie's father had served with the corps in the wars of Central India, his grandfather at the capture of the Cape and elsewhere, and they were always accustomed to speak of it as 'our regiment'—their peripatetic home.

Kenneth Mackenzie, Marquis of Seaforth under James VIII., 'the old Pretender' of the English Whigs, having been forfeited after the battle of Dunblane, his grandson Kenneth repurchased the estates, and in 1721 obtained the earldom of Seaforth, in gratitude for which, seven years afterwards, he offered to raise one thousand at least of his clan in arms for the service of George III., and in the May of 1728, the muster of eleven hundred and thirty men took place in the old cathedral city of Elgin; of these five hundred came from Seaforth, and the remainder from the estates of the Lairds of Scatwell, Kilcoy, Redcastle, and Applecross—all of the surname of Mackenzie, or clan of the *Caber Fey*—so called from the staghorns, the ancient crest of Seaforth, the name of the regiment, then numbered as the 78th of the Line.

In its ranks were some five hundred men of the sept of Macraa, which had followed the banner of Seaforth since Murdoch Dhu of Kintail had unfurled it in the wars of Robert Bruce; and though famous for their unruly spirit, they observed the most perfect subordination till the regiment came to the Castle of Edinburgh, prior to which, a landing of the French being expected near Greenock, two hundred of them with seven 9-pounders marched westward, under Captain Charles Oliphant (Charlie's grandfather, who in his youth had followed *Tearlach Righ nan Gael*), to oppose the enemy, who, however, made no attack; and no finer body of men had ever been seen, even among the Highlanders, naturally a martial race, capable of acquiring the mien and discipline of a soldier as readily as they assume the dress—the graceful 'Garb of old Gaul.'

By the time the companies returned from Greenock, transports came to Leith for the conveyance of the new regiment for foreign service; but *where* the scene of that service lay was illegally, yet sedulously, made a mystery alike to officers and men.

Hints were given of the Channel Islands, but this the latter

would not believe ; and the sensation in the ranks became intense when rumour asserted that they were under secret orders for the distant East, or *sold* to the East India Company for the term of their natural lives—for of more than one Highland regiment which had gone there, little more than the drums and colour-poles ever returned. All their inborn jealousy of the House of Hanover was roused, and strengthened by their natural love of their native land, and the dread of never seeing it more. General Stewart asserts that the regiment *was* under orders for India, the callous authorities having an impression that the poor Highlanders 'were ignorant, unable to comprehend the nature of their stipulations, and (more than all) incapable of demanding redress for any breach of trust.' Moreover, *pay* had been withheld from them.

But the 'wild Macraas' of Ross and the Clan Kenneth of Kintail were not to be so easily deluded as the dishonourable Government imagined, and they were determined not to submit to the smallest infraction of the terms on which they had enlisted in the clan-regiment of their chief and colonel, which were limited service, and *within* the British Isles, as usual with the Scottish Fencible Infantry.

Thus when the day of embarkation came, their long-smothered rage and mistrust could no more be concealed, and a scowl was on every visage.

The regiment paraded on the castle-hill in heavy marching order, and Captain Oliphant read in Gaelic the command for their departure, beginning : '*Ordugh Feachd rhionn, Dun Edin, 22nd September, 1778*' ('In battalion orders, Edinburgh'), and ending with the words '*Gu Gledh Dia'n Righ !*'

The moment these words were uttered there was a shout which startled the earl and his officers ; the ranks broke, confusion reigned, and hundreds began to load and fix their bayonets. A scuffle ensued, several officers were wounded, and one, a Lowlander, was repeatedly fired at.

Seaforth displayed the colours, harangued the revolters in Gaelic, less as their colonel than as their father and chief, and eventually some six hundred, nearly all Mackenzies, marched with him towards Leith; while four hundred Macraas, despising threats and laughing at remonstrances, displayed two tartan plaids on pikes as standards, and proceeded to attack Seaforth's wing near the Tron Church, when many more wounds were given by bayonet and claymore. Shots were next exchanged on Leith Links, where two hundred men deserted to the Macraas, who, now six hundred strong, marched with pipes playing towards the hills that overhang the city, followed by a vast multitude who applauded them, and supplied them with great quantities of fuel and provisions.

They selected a strong position on the summit of Arthur's Seat, posted sentinels, threw up a redoubt to cover their flank, and remained there in a state of open revolt, which caused the greatest excitement in the metropolis, where they had the sympathies of all.

So there they piled their arms and bivouacked as the dewy autumn eve came on, in that lonely place where the heather bloomed sweetly, and the rabbits lurked among the gorse and cropped the pale-green deer-grass on the steep hillsides.

Bound by duty to coerce them, Sir Adolphus Oughton, the commander-in-chief, despatched expresses for all the troops he could collect, and next day there came into Edinburgh the Glasgow regiment, the Buccleugh Fencibles, and the 11th Dragoons under Ralph Dundas, to invest the Highlanders.

The latter were visited by Duncan Lord Macdonald and the Earl of Dunmore, accompanied by Captain Charles Oliphant, a favourite officer, all of whom they received with profound respect; but they inveighed bitterly against their officers and the Government, whom they accused of having sold them to military slavery in the Indies.

'We will fight the Mackenzies under the chief who has

deluded us,' said they ; ' we will fight Buccleugh's Lowland bodachs and yonder Saxon troopers too ; but we will rather find our graves where we stand than in the land of the stranger !'

It was a bright September evening, and the lowing cattle were being driven to many a secluded farmyard and thatched homestead, where now the villas and gardens of Newington and the streets and squares of the southern new town are ; the golden grain had all been gathered, but the stubble was brown on many a fair field that lay westward of the mountain whose slopes were steeped in sunshine, like all the lovely landscape that stretched away to the base of the noble Pentlands ; and the heart of Captain Oliphant grew sad as he descended towards the city, and thought of the slaughter that would be sure to ensue on the morrow. He had by his side an old hereditary claymore with the mystic S in the fret-work of the hilt—a sword to be bequeathed to his son Patrick—but he resolved that he would rather die than draw it against the 'wild Macraas' of the left wing.

Next day the Earl of Dunmore—son of Earl William who was tried at Southwark for being out in the '45—visited the Macraas, and after presenting them with a *bond* containing a full pardon, and a promise of arrears of pay, they formed in order, and with the earl and the pipers at their head, descended to Holyrood, where they saluted the general with three cheers, and cast all their bonnets like a dark cloud into the air.

In hollow square he thanked them for their obedience, and exhorted them to observe it in future ; and that evening the whole regiment sailed for Guernsey, from whence not long after it took its departure for the Indies, and the long voyage proved a sorrowful one.

Their Colonel, Lord Seaforth, died, and found a grave in the waters ere they passed St. Helena ; and the poor Highlanders, who loved him as only a Highland chief was loved, began to lose all heart. And on the day of his funeral, many

wept bitterly when in lieu of the pibroch the pipes sent up the wail of *Cha till mi tulle*—the lament ‘I shall never return.’ To soldiers of the present day it is impossible to realise the effect this event had on the clan-regiment. Seaforth was associated with all their past history and the recollections of that home to which they all hoped to return together; but such was the effect of his death, that before the corps reached Madras in April, 1782, 230 men had died at sea, and only 390 out of 1100 who left Britain were fit for duty.

In the long war against Tippoo Sahib, and the capture of the Cape of Good Hope, the regiment—though new faces yearly filled its fast-thinned ranks—covered itself with glory, as every Highland regiment will ever do, so long as the unity and *esprit de corps* of it are preserved.

In such a regiment, a Highlander always feels scope for that enthusiasm which is a part of his character. ‘There,’ wrote one who knew it well, ‘mingled with his countrymen, he tells and hears the tales of other times, beguiles the weary watch of the night with the songs that echoed through the hall of his chief, or repeats on the toilsome march the love-ditty inspired by the maiden that first charmed him with the smile of beauty and the voice of melody in his native glen. The recollections and associations preserve in pristine vigour the fairest trait in the Highland character. Social and convivial as Donald’s inclinations are, when others share the cup of festivity, he retires to his barrack or tent, and adds the hard-saved sixpence to the little hoard which the paymaster promises to remit home to pay his old father’s arrear of rent, or to purchase a cow for his widowed mother.’

Slaughter abroad and depopulation at home—that state of things of which the earl made a mockery, and which Daljarroch so bitterly resented—gradually led to the regiment losing its clan connection and name; and in 1823 it appeared in the attire it now wears, the Stuart tartan trews and plumed bonnet, as the Duke of Albany’s Own Highlanders, after being renumbered as the 72nd Regiment.

In this costume it helped to humble the Russians in the Crimea, and to crush the Sepoy rebels on the plains of Central India; and there it was that at the storming of Kotah, when overhead the sky was like a sheet of heated brass, when the baked earth gaped with fissures, when sun-stroke was frequent, and horses and men perished thick as leaves by the wayside, they went swarming up the breach under a fire from twenty pieces of cannon, with pipes playing, and making the air resound to the shout of 'Scotland for ever!'—the old Waterloo *cri de guerre* of the Greys and Gordon Highlanders. (*Scotsman*, 28th May, 1858.)

And then it was that Charlie's father, Phadrig Staun—or stubborn Pat of Dalhonzie—at the head of the grenadiers, slew the *ex-Kote* havildar, who commanded the rebels after the Rajah of Kotah had fled, and slew him with the same claymore which Charlie now carried by his side.

Now the regiment had gone to India again. Embarking at Cork in February, 1871, it went, *via* Bombay, to Umballa and the great camp of exercise at Delhi; thence to Peshawur and Sealkote, to keep the Afghans in order; and from Sealkote in November, 1878, to the Koorum Valley, where it pitched its tents, and numbered nine hundred bayonets.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ANCHOR LET GO.

THE *Simla* for some time had a strong and favourable breeze, and with this and her auxiliary screw made rapid progress. Ships were often in sight, and every heart beat high with anticipation of soon seeing the land; Daljarroch alone was perhaps doggedly indifferent on the subject.

The enforced separation by time and distance consequent on his foreign service, for a period the length of which he

could not foresee, precluded completely all those chances of reconciliation or reunion with Augusta which a residence at home must have afforded him; and Daljarroch felt sometimes almost maddened by a contemplation of the chances thus lost of regaining her love (if he ever had lost it), of taking his position as her husband, and shielding her from the effects of her own pride and folly, and from contingencies and complications that were dubious and painful to consider.

As the voyage drew to its close, it became evident that much of Miss Gushington's flippant and flirty way had given place to a gravity of demeanour, born doubtless of her mortification and pique at Charlie's indifference to her advances, for such they were.

To do the girl justice, she had undoubtedly grown fonder of him than she cared to acknowledge even to herself, or than he could have had the least conception of; but her quick-witted chaperon saw through the girl's secret heart, and had more than once laughingly desired her to take courage and wait, for they were not yet at Lahore; adding, that she had never known an instance of a woman's failing to win the regard of any man—whether engaged or not—if once she set herself to do so. Men were all alike, and when far from the lips of those that they loved, took Tommy Moore's advice, and made love to the lips that were near.

She got Charlie easily enough—for how could he decline to a bright and gay young girl?—to accompany her in many a duet, in which he acquitted himself well—so well, that she surmised:

‘What if some soft memory of another—she of the ring—is the cause of all the wonderful pathos he throws into his singing?’

And this surmise—a correct one—gave her often cause, as she phrased it, ‘for a jolly good think’ at night over it all.

The fair Polly knew that she and Charlie Oliphant were excellent friends, so far as he was concerned; but she felt

that there was every way wanting between them that nameless and subtle something, by which those who love instinctively feel that they understand each other.

Though he came of a fierce and, as we all now know them to be, treacherous race, Abdoollah Khan seemed deeply grateful to Charlie for all his kindness to him, which was exhibited in many ways, in procuring him comfortable raiment from the ship's stores, giving him good wages, though he had no way of spending them, and getting sherbet for him from the Parsee merchant's store, as Abdoollah, being a strict Mussulman, could not touch either wine or the grog served out by the quarter-master ; but he had rather more than an aversion for the companion of his master, Cosmo Crawford, whose mistrust of him he speedily detected. Thus he was loath to tell or describe, in his presence, aught that related to his native country, save once, when in attendance on the two in Charlie's cabin, he ventured to dwell upon the Afghan horsemen in exaggerated terms, at which Cosmo laughed, and Abdoollah gave him a dark and menacing glance.

'By Jove, Charlie ! if I were taking the regiment into action, and such a herd of wild horsemen came upon us,' said Cosmo, 'I would show them the right way to form grand-division squares, or company ones, in a twinkling.'

'Luckily for the regiment, you are *not* likely to take it into action, Cosmo,' replied Charlie ; 'besides, grand-division squares are rather out of fashion now. But don't laugh at poor Abdoollah, who naturally thinks his native land the best land on earth. It can boast of a bazaar at Cabul that was once the emporium of the Eastern world.'

'True, sahib,' said Abdoollah, who was busy unpacking a case of wine, 'but the only shops there of interest now are those of the armourers and saddlers, or the dealers in skins and stuffs peculiar to Cabul. But at this season it is a sight there to see the bars of the coffee and fruit dealers, with their great sparkling blocks of compressed snow, always crowded by thirsty workmen and soldiers of Yakoob Khan, each

lingering for his turn to get an anna's worth of ice, when the weather is hot and breathless.'

'Inshallah, old fellow, I hope soon to see it all,' replied Cosmo, as he lay back in a long Indian cane chair, with a leg over each arm thereof, and smoked a long cheroot, the picture of ease and goodnature, and handed his case that the 'khitmutghar' might take another; but Abdoollah declined.

'Shall I tell you, sahib, how a miser was once punished by a porter of that bazaar?' he asked.

'If you choose,' said Charlie.

'Some terrible narrative of daggers and bowstrings, I suppose,' added Crawford.

'Before the time of Sha Soojah-ool-moolk, there was a merchant of Cabul whose wealth was only equalled by his avarice,' began Abdoollah, whose story we repeat in our own fashion; 'and one day he agreed with a porter to carry home for him to his house near the Bala Hissar, a great basket of beautiful Muscovite iridescent crystal vases, that shone like soap-bubbles in the sun. For this ten annas were to be paid.

"My friend," said he, as they proceeded up the slope crowned by the Bala Hissar, "you are young, but I am aged; you can earn rupees in plenty. Strike off, for the sake of the prophet, an anna from your hire."

'This strange request was repeated again and again, till they reached the house of the merchant; when there, the facile porter had but *one* anna to receive.

"Resign also that last anna," quoth the merchant, "and instead thereof I will give you three pieces of advice."

"Agreed, master," replied the poor perspiring bearer.

"Well then," said the miser, "if any man tells you it is better to be fasting than feasting, believe him not; if another tells you that poverty is better than wealth, believe him not; if a third tells you it is better to travel afoot in old slippers rather than on a beautiful steed, believe him not."

"Master," replied the bewildered porter, "I knew these

things before ; but if you will hearken unto me, you shall hear such advice as you never heard."

"What is it?" asked the miser eagerly, as they were now at the summit of a great stair.

"This!" replied the porter, giving the basket one vigorous kick which sent it and its frail contents flying down the marble steps ; "if anyone tells you that one of your crystal jars remains unbroken, do not believe him !"

'And turning, he fled back to the bazaar.'

This anecdote showed that Abdoollah Khan was not without wit ; and his hearers listened, unaware that it was perhaps one of the common stock stories of the professional Eastern story-teller.

The voyage was drawing to a close now ; many friendships seemed to have been formed, among the men especially, some of whom, over their wine and cigars, had discovered each other 'to be deuced good sort of fellows,' and would be glad to meet again—heaven knew when—'up country' somewhere ; but who can be assured of that event in the mighty world of India, where the kingdom of the Nizam alone is larger than all England, from Berwick to Falmouth ?

The announcement, one morning at half-past seven, that Bombay Lighthouse was visible from the masthead, brought all on deck, from whence it was in sight soon after ; but just about that time, the Parsee Khao Rummajee (by the way, the names of all Parsee merchants and bankers end in *jee*) who had been long sick and ailing, expired, and cast a species of gloom over an otherwise joyful day.

He thus escaped the dreaded interment at sea ; but that event, when it occurred ashore, was a source of some excitement ere Charlie quitted Bombay.

In due time the Fairway Buoy was passed ; the anchor was let go in eighteen fathoms of water ; the steam blew off ; the topsails were handed ; the light breeze swept through the rigging, and H.M.S. *Simla* swung at her moorings in the beautiful harbour of Bombay.

Forgetful of the handsome girl who kept by his side, Charlie, full of natural excitement at beholding for the first time that mighty land of ten thousand wonders, was intent on observing the harbour, almost landlocked by isles that are teeming with fertility, in the bright rays of a glorious evening sun, under a cloudless sky of the deepest and intensest blue.

There rode the stately *Simla*, with every yard squared by the lifts and braces, her lofty masts well stayed aft, and every inch of standing and running rigging tight as the strings of a harp, and her sides lined with red-coats, for already the men were getting rid of their canvas sea-toggery in anticipation of the shore. Hundreds of noble ships, the most stately merchantmen in the world, were anchored around her on every hand, or moored alongside the moles; and strange to the eyes of Charlie, and those who looked on them for the first time, was the aspect of the city, divided into two towns, the White and Black. The former, consisting of two-storied houses well-chunammed, or plastered, with green verandahs, and roofs covered with tiles, the requirements of the climate being studied rather than beauty, the great white-washed square mass of the Scottish church, and the tower of the cathedral rising over all; the latter, composed almost entirely of dusky dwellings, but embosomed in banana, cocoa-nut, and other trees, which hid its squalor and made the distance picturesque.

And there too were the great land-battery at the Apollo Bunder (a sight readily caught by a soldier's eye), and the beautiful Malabar Hill, once the haunt of the hyæna, dotted with white buildings and covered with brilliant foliage, but having, too, those awful Towers of Silence, where the dead of the Parsee sect are deposited; and through the glass could be seen passing to and fro British soldiers and brown-visaged sepoy, Europeans, half-naked Hindoos, Mahometans in flowing attire, horsemen and footmen, carriages and buggies, and bullock-gharries, with their jingling bells and waving curtains.

The *Simla* was soon surrounded by *dingies* (or native boats), and despite sentinels, *doby wallahs*, or washermen, got on board, with dog-eared certificates, seeking the patronage of the officers and the ladies.

Staff and medical officers now came to the ship to receive reports as to the actual state of the troops, as to what casualties had occurred, and so forth, after which the pleasant order to prepare for disembarkation on the morrow went cheerily through the crowd on deck, as it was feared that an investigation into the cause of the Parsee's death might cause some delay; but his body was at once taken on shore to his house, by order of the Panchayet of the Parsee community.

Going to India is no longer the bugbear—the six months' stormy voyage round the Cape of Good Hope—it was in our early days, leaving disgusting memories of a foul orlop-deck, sea-sickness, rancid salt-meat, maggoty biscuits, putrid water, and dirty duck frocks; for the steam transports of the Victorian age are literally floating palaces, when compared with even the fine old vessels of the East India Company.

So the pleasant night closed in, and Polly Gushington lingered on deck with Charlie—on deck for the last time—for there was much, as she said, that was novel and interesting for their eyes to dwell upon.

The lights on shore, casting long lines of radiance across the tremulous waters; the grotesque build of the native craft; the odour of teak-wood smoke on the still air; the Turkey buzzards hovering about in the fairway, and the voices of the last lingering fishermen coming as near as the sentries would let them, crying *mutchee* (fish) in a nasal, yet plaintive drawl—all spoke of the far-away land to which they had come.

And Polly clung to his arm, and 'made eyes,' and talked to him, while he was dreaming of a possible future in Scotland, with *another*, as something too bright to be realised.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TOWERS OF SILENCE.

A DAY or two elapsed at Bombay before the troops took the train up-country, and it chanced that Oliphant and Crawford, while rambling in the vicinity of Malabar Hill, came upon the funeral procession conveying their fellow-voyager, the Parsee merchant, to his last home. They followed from mere curiosity, but subsequent events rendered it an episode which neither of them ever forgot; and these events are still remembered in Bombay.

The Parsee mode of disposing of the dead is a most revolting one, but entirely peculiar to themselves, though they regard with horror the Hindoo practice of throwing them into rivers, or cremating them.

It was on the day after the ship had anchored inside the harbour. The duty of carrying a Parsee corpse belongs to a particular set of people, who during the performance must neither speak nor touch wood, hence it is borne upon an iron bier, covered with a white cloth. The bearers, six in number, were closely veiled, and clothed in long white garments, followed by a number of persons in similar costume, walking in pairs, and linked together by a white handkerchief.

'Poor old Rummajee,' said Charlie, as this ghost-like procession filed past, and the fat paunchy figure and lemon-coloured face of the black-eyed Parsee, with his conical hat, seemed to rise before him, with laughing Mrs. De Tomkyns Browne and the other ladies enjoying his iced champagne.

'Poor old file!' added Cosmo; 'I have more than once caught him saying his prayers to the cabin lamp when he thought no one was by, though paraffine oil must have been a poor substitute for the sacred fire.'

On Malabar Hill, in the Isle of Bombay, within a short distance of each other, are the churchyard of the Christians,

the cemetery of the Mussulmans, the Hindoo place of cremation, and the two Towers of Silence where the Parsees leave their dead to be devoured by the birds of the air, for they have long deemed that interment of the flesh in the stomachs of birds of prey an honourable and enviable distinction—a custom brought by the Fire-worshippers from Persia to India.

These towers are great enclosures without roof or covering of any kind, about sixty feet in diameter, with stone walls twenty feet in height. Enormous bloated vultures and kites, gorged with human flesh, sit in close rows on the summits of the towers, which are divided into three compartments, wherein the bodies of men, women, and children are deposited apart, all nude as they came into the world.

Some relative or friend, it is said, watches anxiously by at a short distance, to ascertain which eye is plucked out by the birds, and from thence it is inferred whether the soul of the departed is in happiness or misery.

It had been decided that the body of Khao Rummajee was to be exposed to the vultures in what is locally known as Kapis Khao's Dokhma or Tower, and therein it was accordingly left; and as Oliphant and Cosmo descended the hill, on looking back, they saw that the kites had vanished from the summits of both towers, and felt, with a shudder of disgust, that with beak and claw the terrible banquet had begun!

In the afternoon it chanced—as the local papers informed them—that the body of another Parsee was borne to Kapis Khao's Tower, and while the relatives were taking their last farewell of the dead, the *nassasalars*, or corpse-bearers, were pushing open the ponderous iron door. On looking in, they saw something unusual—*what*, they did not say; but they closed the door with alarm in their faces and precipitation in their manner.

They then informed the mourners that the body must be borne to the other tower, and when questioned as to the

reason of a proceeding so singular, they urged their duty of silence, or gave evasive answers ; so the body was duly deposited in the other tower. A Parsee, suspecting some mystery, went to the *Sigree*, or house of prayer, to watch the *nassasalars* ; and to his astonishment, saw them, instead of descending to the city, re-enter the tower of Kapis Khao, and remain there half-an-hour, during which more than once a wailing cry rang upon the air, and scared the vultures.

What could be their purpose or object, save that which a terrible suspicion suggested to the watcher, that they had seen Khao Rummajee alive, and had returned there to kill him, in accordance with a well-known Zoroastrian superstition, that no one should ever re-enter the world from a Tower of Silence, lest that person should be the cause of dreadful plagues ; and next day all Bombay rang with the story.

It caused dreadful excitement among the Parsees, for no man was better known on 'Change than the defunct Rummajee ; and though all believed that the *nassasalars* had done the dreadful deed of which they were suspected, and were accused, the native press preserved a studious silence on the subject.

The Panchayet, or five heads of the Parsee community, suggested with alarm that the whole story had arisen from the peculiar conduct of those who bore Khao Rummajee ; that perhaps a body had fallen against the iron door, which they did not push completely open, lest his friends might be shocked by the sight.

No one believed this, and the Parsees insisted that the bearers had invented this tale to save them from the consequences of their own guilt at the hands of the European authorities.

The Panchayet then pointed out that chains are hung round the inside of these Towers of Silence, to enable persons who may awake from a trance to escape ; but the more modern Parsees, as distinguished from the old and orthodox Zoroastrians, believed that as the corpse-bearers

have orders to let no one escape from these appalling towers, their friend Rummajee had been basely murdered—else why did they return, and who uttered the cries that had been heard?

‘Few things will startle you after you have been a little time in India, Charlie,’ said Daljarroch, when Oliphant was expressing his astonishment at this affair; ‘but I have more than once, when here before, heard strange stories of men escaping from these Towers of Silence by little else than miracles, and who have since been wandering over the face of the earth, carefully avoiding the places where they were known, believing that if discovered they would assuredly be killed by their compatriots; and all Bombay knows the story of the tragic death of a beautiful young Guebre girl who revived in a tower, and whose parents, in obedience to superstition, consented to her being strangled by the remorseless *nassasalars*.’

And with this grim episode fresh in their minds, our friends took their departure from Bombay by railway. A journey of fourteen hundred miles lay before them *viâ* Benares ere they could reach Lahore, ‘where papa was stationed,’ so Miss Polly Gushington gave herself up to a sort of fool’s paradise, in the hope that ere it ended something might be made of Charlie after all.

As Spurrier Clank’s regiment was quartered in Bombay, he had—fortunately for all parties—to bid farewell to her flirting chaperon; but by judiciously ‘tipping’ the officials, he obtained for both ladies an entire compartment in one of those large roomy carriages which are supplied with snug sleeping berths that can be lowered from the wall at will. In India the railway system is pretty much the same as it is in Europe, though the great majority of the native passengers would prefer that the trains would allow of their alighting every evening, of cooking their food, enjoying a comfortable sleep, and studying more closely the perils by which caste might be lost.

We have no intention of doing 'guide-book,' and detailing the wonders through which the swift train swept for many days and many nights—the wonders of art and of nature; past temples and pyramids of vast size, carved rarely as a Chinese puzzle-ball; walled cities and hill-forts surmounting rocky eyries; dense forests where the tiger lurked, and the wild deer haunted the brake; domed mosques, tombs, sacred groves and alligator-tanks, where scaly monsters lurked amid the mud and ooze, and water-lilies; across vast rivers such as the Nerbudda, the Jumna, and the Ganges, where graceful Hindoo maidens set their love-lamps, and Hindoo mothers their babes—a sacrifice to Kali—a float, like Moses on the stream—vast rivers covered with wonderful budgerows or native boats, and overlooked by stately ghauts of shining marble; or where nature in her fertility rioted in unbounded luxuriance in tree, herb and flower; and at times through the carriage windows there came the delicious perfume from the golden bells of the baubool tree, or from the pink and white blossom of the oleander, the pride of the jungle. And day by day everything was seen under the fierce white scorching glare of the Indian sunshine.

The peculiar aspect of the railway stations, by their frequent recurrence, soon ceased to impress Charlie Oliphant; though there were brown natives on the platform in turban and cummerbund, with the eye of Siva painted on their foreheads; camels, even elephants, laden with luggage; singularly attired sepoy in the pay of local princes, some with black hats, antique red coats, and black-painted, clumsy matchlocks, and bands exhibiting the queerest collection of old brass instruments, including gigantic horns and cymbals, and playing the most execrable music; and ever and anon there were seen of course the British soldier, in kalkee uniform, or in his orthodox red coat, ever a welcome sight, as it always spoke of *home*.

And Charlie found his kitmutghar, Abdoollah, invaluable in many ways in his usefulness, knowledge, and attention upon

himself and his friends ; an honest fellow, too, who, unlike other native servants, never looked for *dustoorie*.

Dinner here and tiffin there broke the journey, but save the ordinary attention that any gentleman may pay, and a lady receive, the intimacy of Charlie and his fair fellow-traveller made no further progress than it had done on board the *Simla*; and right glad was he when, after so many days and nights of railway journeying, the fort, palace, and mosques of Lahore, whilom the capital of fierce old Runjeet Sing, came in sight, and he knew that the rail would be quitted for the saddle, or the march afoot, through what remained of the Punjaub towards the banks of the Indus.

Already Cosmo had begun to quiz Charlie Oliphant on the tender leave-taking that must soon ensue now between him and their fair-haired *compagnon de voyage*, when she felt an arm in a scarlet sleeve round her waist for the last time, perhaps, and saw him shed a 'soldier's tear,' etc., unless they halted—as was probable—for some days at Lahore ; and Daljarroch, as he listened to the young fellow's banter, let his snow grim features relax in a smile.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A GLANCE HOMEWARD.

WE are no longer in the slow, steady old coaching-days of ten miles an hour ; thus a novelist may, nay must, fly all round the world occasionally without violating the unities, even as Puck, foretelling telegraphy, as it were, declared :

' I'll put a girdle round about the earth
In forty minutes ;'

an idea also to be found in Champman's *Bussy d'Ambois*, in 1607.

Thus we must shift the scene thousands of miles away to the prosaic region of Mayfair.

Though Charlie's watch had stopped so mysteriously on that day, in the Arabian Sea, no evil had happened to Auriel.

Sick of riding in the empty Row, and of reading novels and serials, she was now puzzling her way through her Berlin wools, affecting to be busy finishing a piece of work which she had begun at Abercairnie, when Charlie was there; and thus every bud and flower served but to remind her of *him* whose hand had traced the pattern for her.

'Berlin wool-work!' she thought, with a little laugh; 'when I think of the yards of tapestry at Abercairnie, worked by the Countess of Earl John who fell at Glenlivet, or by the Countess of Earl William, the Covenanter, I can but wonder who will look at *my* worsted work of the age of Victoria!'

Ennuyéd by the dulness of London—dull at least to her—she longed even for the seclusion of the country, and to be back in her own peculiar corner of the glorious garden at Abercairnie, in her garden-hat, watching her flowers, snipping faulty buds [off her roses, idling in the leafy vistas of the shrubberies, and thinking of the days when she had done so with Charlie—her 'young chevalier.'

'Who in autumn would be in London, that could get out of it?' thought the now petulant little beauty, moped to death in that huge house at Mayfair; while the earl, to punish her, made no proposal for going anywhere, or accepting any of the numerous invitations they received, for, sooth to say, the advent of the returned prodigal, Mr. William Daljarroch, and the claims he advanced, had rather more than scared his lordship.

Consequently there was nothing to prevent the girl's mind from brooding perpetually and sadly on the past and the doubtful future.

From the windows she could see every other house in the street scaffolded to the top, and in possession of a squad of artisans in paper-caps, with foot-rules sticking out of their fustian-trousers, while that process of yearly plastering and

repainting peculiar to London went busily on, against the time when everybody would be returning 'to town.' In the window-boxes the flowers were faded ; the shrubs dirty and brown ; and even the very plumage of the street sparrows had a dusty aspect.

London was out of town. The officer of the guard, after a lonely walk in empty Pall Mall, dined in a lonely way at gloomy St. James's, not half so jolly as any private in his regiment, who spent his time between Wellington Barracks and the private houses to which he had free *entrée*—making love to the giddy maids, dining here, supping there, and being treated to the music-hall, or *café chantant*, on poor little Miss Gingham's savings.

Auriel had heard from Augusta, who had come no further south than the Scottish metropolis, and wanted some news of Duncan Daljarroch.

'Is it of his life, or his death, she wishes to know?' thought Auriel, with some natural indignation at her elder sister.

Sir John Lennell was in London—whither he had come, as he promised the earl—and meant once more to try his chances with Auriel, to her intense annoyance.

The earl had learned from their mutual law-agents, how from the dissipated character and erratic habits of the returned heir, that no legal steps had been taken in any way concerning him ; that Duncan's affairs were in a species of orderly confusion, and that while the funds of the estate were accumulating at his banker's, he drew not a shilling from them now, seeming, in fact, to have relinquished all interest therein.

'My poor Augusta!' said the earl to Sir John. 'That fellow Daljarroch is a downright swindler!' he added, oblivious of the thousands his son-in-law had paid for him. 'So, so—this Scottish patriot is only a beggar—a liar after all,' he continued, lashing himself into a rage—'a very liar—a vicious intruder, as Mr. MacCringer justly called him. My poor deluded girl!'

Auriel heard such hard things said often, and they filled her with dismay by anticipation. The apparent ruin that Augusta's marriage implied would have to be repaired by a sacrifice of *herself*; and daily she thought, would that terrible time ever come when she must think of Charlie Oliphant—her promised husband—no more, no more !

Lennell was certainly a tall and good-looking fellow, just about forty, or a little past it, with handsome features that were expressive of a kind disposition, while his general air was that of a man well satisfied with himself and all the world at large ; but to Auriel's fancy, his image paled as she thought of the handsome young soldier-lover, who seemed to her mind the nearest approach to a hero she had known (and yet nothing heroic had Charlie done), and tears welled up, unbidden, to her eyes—tears that the absent would have thanked heaven to see !

For, though never for a moment doubting the love and faith of Auriel, Charlie had often thought with fear, that if the earl, by any means, had forced the cold and haughty Augusta to bend to his iron will, how much more easily would he be able to bend poor little, gentle Auriel !

Sir John had not yet spoken again on the subject the latter dreaded so much ; he was a well-bred man, and though very much in love with Auriel in his own plain undemonstrative way, felt that he could be patient, and wait for a lucky time.

She was gravely, earnestly, all but sternly warned that she must receive Sir John Lennell as her future husband, the late *malheur* of Duncan Daljarroch rendering it imperative that for the credit of the family 'something must be done.'

Auriel shivered as her father said these things, and covered her face with her hands.

'Auriel,' said he, on one occasion, 'that a daughter of mine should be fastidious—even delicately fastidious—occasions me no surprise ; but I cannot comprehend what there can be so repugnant to your nature in a marriage with Sir

John Lennell, whose offers are as liberal as they are honourable. Speak !

But Auriel dared not trust herself to speak. She had an intense filial respect for her father, and could not taunt him with having forced a marriage on one daughter when in pecuniary difficulties, and that he was now seeking to sell another.

‘Are you so enamoured of the dull life you are likely to lead, that you would wish to change it for one still more dull and ineffably ignoble?’

Again the girl shivered, for she knew he referred to Charlie Oliphant, whom he would have disdained to name, as if the existence of the latter’s love for her was a thing too monstrous for consideration.

‘Oh, papa ! do not let an impossible love for this man stand between me and your love for me !’

‘This man !’ repeated the earl, angrily ; ‘is it thus you speak of one of the wealthiest and, so far as patent goes, oldest baronets in Scotland?’

Auriel sighed.

‘I never knew you behave so foolishly before, as you are comporting yourself now,’ he continued in his lofty manner, and without the least iota of love or tenderness in his tone, for her too evident agitation rendered him indignant. ‘When Ochtertyre succeeds me, he will have enough to do beside supporting two dependent sisters ; so think over what I say, for those who are so dowerless need not be too delicate in accepting such magnificent offers as those of my friend Lennell. When again he addresses you on the subject, if you refuse—but I do not think you will dare to do so !’

And the earl, chafing with indignation, stalked from the drawing-room, and left Auriel to her own reflections.

Now the irate peer could neither—if thwarted—revenge himself by thrusting her into a convent, or shutting her up in some mouldy vault, like the stern parent of a melodrama ; but she felt that he might make her life very miserable.

‘What am I to do? Where will all this end?’ wailed the girl as she interlaced her white slender fingers above her golden hair, and cast her eyes upward imploringly. ‘Am I a slave? Why should I not be free?’

For a moment she drew herself up proudly, and with an expression of disdain upon her face that made her resemblance to Augusta remarkable.

Then she thought of taking Sir John Lennell into her confidence, as he seemed so good and kind—of telling him of her love for another, without saying who that other was—of casting herself upon his generosity and chivalry as it were; but anon the thought was repellent to her native pride, and the dread that he might repeat it all to the earl filled her with a new alarm, and covering her face, unable to endure the anguish called up by the whole situation, her whole frame trembled with convulsive emotion, and hot tears streamed through her fingers; and at that moment she felt passionately in her heart, that she would gladly have exchanged her splendid surroundings for a share of Charlie’s tent on the slopes of the Khyber Pass, or wherever he was.

Meanwhile the chief bugbear of the earl was the return of the prodigal, an event which had wrought such a disastrous effect in the affairs of Augusta; as for those of her absent husband, he cared not a jot.

Though, until satisfied with distinct legal proofs, the result of much necessary correspondence with the headquarters of the regiment to which Willie Daljarroch had belonged in India, the cautious lawyers would only give moderate advances to the latter, yet these advances were more than enough to afford him the luxury of daily and nightly indulgence in strong liquors, the factitious effects of which were always followed by terrible reaction, with occasional relapses of prostrating jungle fever.

The pleasure of indulgence had become with him an actual necessity, and Mrs. Daljarroch, in her love for her first-born

—especially after the departure of Duncan for India—made great efforts to discover the prodigal, in the desperate hope of reclaiming him ; but so low were his haunts, so obscure his movements, and so erratic his habits, she had to relinquish the hope as vain at present, and await the events which were in the womb of Time.

He had totally lost all respect, regard for himself, or anyone else ; the Demon of Drink had taken possession of him ; and the temptation to procure money for more drink led him to lie, to cheat, and lastly to steal ; so he—the alleged heir to the wealth of old Duncan Daljarroch, the great manufacturer, was subjected to a somewhat protracted term of imprisonment by the authorities—a term during which the offices of Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett ceased to be troubled by the noisy, degrading, and annoying visits which he was wont to pay at all manner of untimeous hours.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WITH THE KHOORUM COLUMN.

SEVERAL months had now elapsed since the detachment of Duncan Daljarroch had joined the regiment, then forming a part of the column in the Khoorum Valley, under General Roberts.

The *empressement* with which he was received by all ranks was somewhat of a relief to the overcharged heart of Duncan, who was a favourite with all the Highlanders ; thus after he had marched into camp, man after man came to his tent on every pretence, or on none at all, to speak with him, to be spoken to, and many a brave fellow was made glad by a shake of his hand, and felt that he could go to the cannon's mouth for Duncan Daljarroch.

Long prior to their reaching the Khoorum Valley, Charlie's

khitmutgar—Abdoollah Khan—on coming near his native mountains, had disappeared—‘bolted, but without taking the family-plate,’ as Cosmo styled Charlie’s modest case, containing a knife, fork, and spoon—or indeed aught more than the clothes he stood in ; but Charlie had not, however, seen the last of Abdoollah.

As yet, only two letters had come to Daljarroch from Auriel, and carefully worded they were ; but Charlie, though longing with all his soul to see the lines her hand had traced, had on each occasion to content him with a kind message to himself.

Lady Augusta’s prolonged residence in Edinburgh, a circumstance of which they now heard for the first time—a place the dulness of which she had ever condemned—puzzled Duncan ; and he could only surmise that she was loath as yet, to give reason for speculation among her friends if she returned to Abercairnie or Mayfair, till some final arrangements were made with his brother.

With the history or progress of the war, especially the politics thereof—with the formation of a ‘scientific frontier,’ whatever that may be—we have nothing to do, our task lying only with the part borne by some of our *dramatis personæ* in wild Afghanistan, where the people are more lawless than in any other part of India, and where the authority of the monarch, unless in great towns, or the districts immediately adjacent to them, extended no further than the authority of the earlier kings of Scotland did over the Highland clans.

And to the latter the Afghans bear a considerable resemblance, in so far as their division into tribes and septs, each under its own chief, will go—paying no taxes and yielding obedience to none save him. Thus the kingdom of Cabul is merely a confederation of so many petty republics, united in nothing save a hatred of all invaders, and in character every way cruel, treacherous and bloodthirsty.

In the pleasant valley watered by the silvery Khoorum, a tributary of the Indus when swelled by rains, and the source of which is among the mountains, some sixty miles from

Cabul, and an equal distance from Ghuznee, the column of Roberts was kept more than usually on the alert; but it had an able leader who had served many campaigns in India, and who, at the siege of Delhi, won the Victoria Cross for personal gallantry in capturing a standard and sabring its bearer.

Khoorum is a border province in the extreme east of Afghanistan, and in times long past was a source of contention between the Afghans and Sikhs, as the wide valley has a great deal of champaign country, and was always regarded by the latter as their own; but when we conquered them, Khoorum was left to Ameer, who deemed it doubly of value, from its fertility, and being the channel through which he could constantly obtain supplies of rifles and modern arms of European manufacture.

The first night Charlie was in camp, he had his 'baptism of fire,' and a narrow escape too, when about ten o'clock the tents of the Albany Highlanders were suddenly fired into from the side of a hill, where the long juzails, or Afghan rifles, were seen to flash redly out amid the mist and gloom, as some of the enemy crept close to the advanced sentineis, while a group of the officers were standing round a blazing wood-fire.

'Stand to your arms—fall in!' was the almost needless cry, as the men came rushing from their tents, rifle in hand; and Daljarroch, by a few vigorous kicks, scattered the burning logs, so that the fire should give no light to aim by.

For the first time Charlie was under fire, and he felt a momentary tightening of the chest—perhaps a shortness of breath—but momentary only, as Afghan bullets—if bullets they were—came whizzing past, as they are wont to fire slugs, nails, or anything that comes to hand.

The attack proved to have been made by some Ghilzies, under the influence of bhang and religious excitement, but who fled after firing a confused volley or two, by which one Highlander only was hit severely ere he could leave his tent.

and Walter Chieslie, a smart and handsome officer—of whom more anon—was slightly wounded by a ball.

The end of November saw the British advance progressing, on the frontiers of Afghanistan ; the Ameer troops from Jelalabad in full flight for Cabul, and the hill-tribes submitting fast to the British arms ; while the Afghan force which held the Khoorum Fort, on the advance of Roberts's column, fell back behind the Peiwar Kotal, where they made every preparation to offer him a desperate resistance, and a severe loss of life was expected.

All ranks heard this with intense satisfaction, as hitherto the opposition to our arms had been weak and puerile ; and as soldiers always muster merrily for a march or a battle, Charlie hailed the warning pipes on the evening of the advance with joy, as he sprang from his camp charpoy (on which Donald, his servant, instantly laid violent hands, and proceeded to pack it), and hurriedly made his ablutions in the case of his helmet, using afterwards the lid thereof as mirror, his comforts having been seriously curtailed by the baggage having been attacked and looted more than once.

His corps was formed in the 2nd Brigade, with the 21st and two other native regiments, with two batteries of artillery—one a mountain battery. Some of the native battalions wore *kalki*, or dust-coloured uniforms, which rendered them almost undistinguishable in twilight.

A sufficient force was left in the rear to form a garrison in the Khoorum Fort.

In advancing in the direction of Cabul, and intent on threading the formidable passes through which the road thereto lies, it was impossible not to recall with something of a thrill the terrible retreat therefrom of our army, thirty-seven years before, when 16,500 human beings perished under the Afghan bullet and the winter snow—one man alone surviving to reach Jelalabad—a story recalling the horrors of the *Noche Triste* of the Spaniards on their retreat from Mexico ; and the terrible retreat of Napoleon from Moscow, combined

with the fearful scenes that attended the fall of Jerusalem.

But no thought of the fate of Elphinstone's army daunted our troops or damped their ardour, as they pushed on amid those stupendous mountains, which in some places reminded the Highlanders of Roberts, of their native land ; and to Oliphant, when he looked around him, as the column with its baggage and guns struggled and toiled on its way, every rugged hill, every shadowy ravine and thunder-riven rock looked familiar, as if like something he had seen in his dear home-country ; and there, as in the ' land of brown heath and shaggy wood,' every rock and glen, ruined tower and ancient tomb, had its own stirring legend or marvel of magic or horror.

And every heart in the corps could not but beat high when the band made the echoes of the vast hills resound to the stirring national quick-step of the Albany Highlanders, though the colours were flying, not over the graceful and historical ' Bonnets of Blue,' but the prosaic white tropical helmets that hail from Pimlico.

' Here we go, Charlie,' said Daljarroch, ' to win fresh laurels, only to be forgotten in time, as are those won by the " Java Boys," the " Moira's march men," the " Rangoon Rangers," and " Bhurtpore Bull-dogs." '

' But like other dogs, we shall have our day,' replied Charlie, laughing. |

' Our day, and nothing more,' said the other, in that bitterness of tone which had become habitual with him now.

A march of some fifteen miles brought the column to the little village of Habili Kila, three miles from the entrance of the pass, where the bugles sounded a halt. Through the field-glass, dense groups of picturesque Afghan mountaineers, with their floating robes, long juzails and round shields, could be seen among many of the rocky defiles in front. A strong reconnaissance was made, very heavy firing ensued, and some loss was sustained ; but the whole position w

disclosed to General Roberts. Part of the ground they occupied was frightfully steep, and part covered with dense and dark woody jungle. Certain heights were won and strong pickets posted on them, after which the whole troops encamped at a sufficient distance to be beyond reach of the Afghan batteries, which were well served ; but that night many of the troops passed the hours on the ground supperless, the commissariat having been unable to get to the front ; and when once night fell it was impossible for heavily-laden animals to get over the rocky ridges on which the camp was pitched.

As the night stole on, occasional shots were fired at the advanced pickets for the mere purpose of harassment : but to these no reply was made, as it would have brought the inlying pickets under arms as supports, and thus disturbed the whole camp.

Three days the troops remained encamped in front of the pass.

On the second, Daljarroch had command of the advanced pickets, and Charlie, who had passed the day with him there (watching the enemy with the deepest interest through his glass, and making a sketch of the features of the place, which his friend was to enclose in his next letter to Auriel), when returning to camp, had a little adventure, connected in a certain degree with the great game of forcing the pass.

The moonlight was magnificent. Far away rose the vast range of the Safid Koh Mountains, more than fifteen thousand feet in height ; in middle distance, and about that altitude, towered the Peiwar Kotal, at the end of a valley through which a roadway ran, amid many steep and almost inaccessible hills, lonely, silent, and grand, the very haunt, one might think, of Biaban, the Spirit of the Waste.

One side of each mountain-peak was steeped in silver light, while each valley between was sunk in black shadow like a fathomless gulf—a wondrous arrangement of strong light and gloomy shade—abyss and peak dotted by red

watch-fires, which lured Charlie to linger (for he had an artistic eye) after he left Daljarroch's post.

Here and there in the immediate foreground glistened—in a sprinkling of hoarfrost, for the season was winter—the white ribs of a camel devoured by the kites long ago ; but the skeletons of bullocks, camels, and horses were as common as stones or shrubs by the wayside.

From a kind of reverie into which he had fallen, Charlie was roused by finding that he was not alone, and instinctively grasped his revolver. Near him, where the moonlight cast a shade under a group of stunted pistachio-trees, which grow wild in that country, he saw two Sepoys of his brigade, in close conversation with one whom he knew to be an Afghan Moollah, or priest, by his distinctive dress, which consisted of a large white turban, and ample loose gown of white cotton.

He was giving the soldiers some papers, which Charlie supposed to be prayers or amulets, *mantras*, or charms—sentences or texts from the Koran—to be worn in the coming strife ; but on seeing him approach, they turned away, and fled towards the camp.

Suspicious of some treachery, Charlie now approached the Moollah, who, with his arms crossed on his bosom and his head down, walked slowly past him, muttering as he went sentences in his own language, which his hearer supposed to be prayers ; but the Afghans can scarcely utter three words without some allusion to the Deity, while the slightest occurrence produces a pious ejaculation.

To lay hands on a priest he was loth, though he might have had little scruple about doing so, had he seen the long double-edged *khunjur*, or dagger, concealed by the Moollah up his sleeve ; but he summoned him in English to stop ; then the stranger only salaamed with both his hands, looked Charlie full in the face, and passing away at a quick pace, disappeared among some rocks close by, as if they had opened and swallowed him up,

Charlie stood for a moment as if rooted to the ground. Where before had he seen that long grave visage with its thin aquiline nose, high cheek-bones, and black gleaming eyes?

'Abdoollah !' he exclaimed ; ' by Jove, that fellow is either Abdoollah or the devil !'

Whether or not the person seen was really his fugitive khitmutgar in disguise, Charlie had reason, when the hour of attack came, to remember the apparently secret conference with the two Sepoys, and the papers which had been delivered to them.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE ATTACK.

NEXT day was the 1st of December, and at night, before the attack was to be made on the pass, Charlie Oliphant, Crawford, and another officer, Walter Chieslie—the same who had been wounded in the night *alerte* with two subs of the —th Native Infantry, were making themselves merry over some supper in Daljarroch's tent—as merry as if they were all certain of meeting there safe and sound upon the morrow.

Through the open door of the tent could be seen the distant mountains that were held by a hardy and watchful foe, and in the foreground the streets of white tents gleaming behind large watchfires lighted here and there, for the night was a very cold one ; the artillery and waggons drawn up wheel to wheel ; the baggage-camels kneeling in a circle, grumbling after their strange fashion ; an elephant or two, half seen, half-lost in shadow—elephants bought by us—for though such animals existed in Afghanistan in the days of Alexander the Great, there are none there now ; but save an occasional dropping shot at the distant pickets, a general silence reigned throughout the camp, for the metal ghurries at the quarter-guards had struck the hour of nine, the evening

gun had boomed along the mountain-sides, and tattoo had been beaten.

All were fully dressed for the coming march, and half-accoutred, with swords, revolvers, field-glasses, and haversacks beside them.

'By Jove, Daljarroch, but this *is* a jolly jar of Cabul wine!' exclaimed Crawford, as the captain's servant placed it in the centre of the board or rather the turf floor of the tent—the festive circle formed by the group who lounged on the grass, or sat on whatever box or case came to hand.

'And flavoured so like madeira, that you can scarcely know the difference,' said Chieslie, as he drained a glass approvingly; 'as the song says:

"Drinking's a Christian diversion,
Unknown to the Turk or the Persian!"

'But not unknown to the Afghans,' said Daljarroch, 'for they take wine on the sly—and Russian vodka, too, if they can get it—in defiance of the Prophet.'

'They don't seem to lock up their wives as his other followers do.'

'True, Charlie,' said the bantering Crawford. 'At home we are told that one wife's a good thing; but here, man alive, one may have a dozen such good things. It may be an advantage, but still the prospect, with all its advantages, would not make me settle in Cabul.'

'Let us get there first before you speak about settling,' said Duncan; 'and now to supper, a smoke, and a nap after, and then to give the Afghans, like Johnny Cope, "a merry, merry morning."'

There was no lack of provision in camp, so the supper was a substantial one, as the natives brought in fowls, eggs, milk, honey, and butter, with grass for the horses, and wood for fuel—all for sale, of course.

Duncan smiled as he looked at the hearty, almost happy group of young fellows, who, when at home, might have exhibited strong signs of disgust had their sherry been corked

their moselle too sweet, their claret not aired, their turtle a trifle too thick, now thankful to eat kabobs off an old ram-rod, chicken fricasseed in a camp kettle lid by the light of a candle stuck in the socket of a bayonet, and washing them down by a mugful of the native wine, or muddy water dashed with indifferent brandy—‘the luxuries of the gorgeous East,’ as Crawford called them.

During the hasty meal, the officers of the Native Infantry referred to some papers which had been found in the tent occupied by two of their Sepoys, who were Mahometans.

‘*Two*,’ thought ‘Charlie, as his mind instantly reverted to the interview he had seen in the moonlight, and the supposed *mantras* the Moollah had given.

‘And these papers?’ asked Duncan, as cigars were lighted, and the wine-jar went round.

‘Show that for years the Ameer, Shere Ali, has been preparing the munitions of war, and issuing instructions to his soldiers,’ replied the officer who first mentioned the matter. ‘In them he exhorts all Mussulmans to rally around *him* on behalf of their religion. “Wage war,” so runs the proclamation—“a *Jehad* on behalf of God and His Holy Prophet, with your property and your lives. Let the rich equip the poor! Let all die for the holy cause! A foreign nation, the Feringhees—dogs and unbelievers—without the slightest cause or provocation, has resolved to invade our country and conquer it.”’

‘A perilous document this, to be circulated among our native troops,’ said Duncan.

‘The proclamation,’ continued the officer, ‘then goes on to urge upon the Afghans a determined resistance to the infidel dogs—’

‘Meaning us!’ said Crawford, with mock dismay.

‘Promises of paradise, and black-eyed houris *ad libitum*—girls made up of musk and amber—to those who die in battle; everlasting torments to those who fly, and ten thousand torments more to those who take the money of a personage known

as Jan Bool, whose people, the English, are infidels animated only by greed, treachery, and all manner of deceit. A nice account of us, is it not ?

‘And from whence did these dangerous and inflammatory documents come?’ asked Daljarroch, with some gravity.

‘They are said to be scattered broadcast about by the chief of the Mirza Khels.’

‘Our fellows swear by the Koran that they know nothing about them,’ said the other officer.

‘But *I* do!’ exclaimed Oliphant.

‘You?’

‘Yes; and your fellows doubtless swore to a falsehood,’ he replied, and then related that which the reader already knows.

‘Well, this shall be seen to on the morrow,’ replied the visitor.

But to-morrow came—in one sense—too late.

‘It has always struck me,’ said Daljarroch, ‘that we trust these Sepoy fellows overmuch; that treachery lurks in secret at the bottom of every native heart, and that but time and opportunity (both of which will come as education spreads with knowledge of power) are wanted to play the old game of the Pandies over again. Our people at home never understood India fully.’

‘Better, however, than they did in our grandfathers’ days,’ said the Sepoy officer, laughing. ‘We have all heard of the man quartered at Meerut, who got a letter from his “governor,” advising him to have a day’s leave, and run down to visit his uncle in Calcutta, and if he was out of town to take Madras on the way home, and drop in upon his brother.’

‘I wish we could get hold of that chief of the Mirza Khels, and have him tied to the muzzle of a nine-pounder!’ said the other; ‘he seems to be own brother to old Scratch himself: more than any other is he active in the extirpation of all stragglers and wounded, and in more than one instance he

has cut off the heads of a whole party, and hung them on a tree like so many cocoa-nuts.'

'Now we've had enough of this up-country talk,' cried Crawford; 'another jorum of the wine—*à la bonne heure!* and then for a song!'

'But no chorusing; we must not disturb the camp,' said Daljarroch.

'Chieslie, rouse yourself; where are you?' said Crawford, for by this time the tent was actually so full of tobacco-smoke, that each saw chiefly the whereabouts of his neighbour by the glowing tip of a cigar, for the door had been tied close to exclude cold. 'A song, Chieslie; you are the only silent man among us, and must sing as a forfeit.'

'Silent, am I?' asked Chieslie, with a little laugh that had no ring in it.

'As a mute, old fellow.'

We have mentioned Walter Chieslie as being a smart and handsome fellow; but he was more than either. There was a rare degree of manly beauty and of a singularly high character in his face, with a calm gravity and sweetness of expression, very taking, especially with all women.

The last representative of the long-since landless and fiery old Chieslies of that Ilk and Dalry he claimed to be. He was of a poetic, enthusiastic nature and somewhat inclined to mysticism; but Charlie Oliphant, who shared his confidence, alone knew that he had one of those strange presentiments, not uncommon in the service, that he would soon be killed in this war—perhaps on the morrow; yet he was calm, brave, resolute, and rather courted danger and perilous duty on every occasion. But this apprehension—if apprehension it was in one so gallant and true—tinged his manner with a gravity that was deemed singular; and thus the song he sang was scarcely one calculated to enliven his hearers, though it expressed his own wishes, and he gave it with a wonderful chord and cadence in his voice as if his whole soul went with it, and its effect was recalled *afterwards* by those who heard it.

We can only give three remembered verses of it here ; but it was a favourite Anglo-Indian song, some fifty years ago :

' Home ! home ! home ! There is Britain's chalky cliff,
Gilt by the sun from afar !
Bring the glass, boy, the glass ; here comes a bird-like skiff,
And there lie our proud men-of-war !
Oh ! my heart at the view bounds as lightly as if
'Twas unscathed as the happiest are.
Home ! home ! home !
'Twas unscathed as the happiest are !

' Home ! home ! home ! Now I leap on the shore
Which has been for long years unto me,
As the form we have loved, but never hope more,
Though we pine ever after, to see.
There lie thy green fields and sweet flowers as before,
Thou shrine of the lovely and free !
Home ! home ! home !
Thou shrine of the lovely and free !

' Home ! home ! home ! There's the old green grove
Where we sought for the nut and the nest ;
But where are they all, who, like me, used to rove,
With heart blythe as mine in their breast ?
And she ! where is *she*, in whose fond girlish love,
Ere I left her and them, I was blest ?
Home ! home ! home !
Ere I left her and them I was blest !

A curious kind of silence, that was not quite silence, was the applause accorded to the song of Chieslie, and more than one soldier lying in the adjacent tents, wakeful on the grass that might cover him by that hour on the morrow, cordially re-echoed its sentiments.

' Home ?' said Crawford ; ' by Jove, I believe it will be long for some of us, before the girls there get hold of the tow-rope ! And now for forty winks ; the " Gathering " will sound in an hour, and then hurrah for our next merry meeting, boys !'

They separated to meet again soon, for already the horses of the staff were saddled and caparisoned ; and Crawford, who had not an anxiety or care, was soon asleep, and felt, so he thought, that he ' could sleep all round the clock.'

A bloody contest was to be fought on the morrow, and

whatever happened to *him*, Auriel would hear of it in time, thought Charlie, and strove vainly to sleep. Chieslie's song haunted him! Why the deuce did he sing it? He thought of the songs that Auriel had been wont to sing to him at Abercairn—one in particular that his mother too was fond of—and the memory of their voices, one dead, the other lost to him, came vividly back to memory.

By one o'clock to-morrow, she would, at the appointed hour, bend all her thoughts to him, even as if she could command that latent fluid which Reichenbach calls the *odic*, and which, according to him, 'rushes through and pervades universal nature; but by that time, might *he* possess the power to think of her?

He strove not to think at all, but to sleep, while treasuring near his heart—in the breast of his Highland doublet, anyway—the faded flower and tress of golden hair which, save her ring, was all he had to remind him of the girl so madly worshipped, and then so far, far away.

It was the face of a woman that haunted Walter Chieslie—an aged face too, for he was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and memory went back now to a fatherless little boy at play on the grass in a tent near Kotah, when the Albany Highlanders stormed it from the revolted 72nd Bengal Infantry and other rebels—a little boy who caught sight of the weeping face of his mother, bowed down in grief, for she had just come from the pallet on which his father had expired of a mortal wound.

Clutching her skirts, he looked up at her so sweetly and wistfully, for children can, at times, see into the great griefs of their seniors. He said, 'Mamma, you have *me*,' and he remembered vividly how at the words, so simple and artless, the widow, his mother, took comfort, and with that passionate yearning of those in sorrow for something to love and cling to, she pressed him to her heart. 'Mamma, you have me!' she never forgot the words of the artless little consoler as the days of gallant boyhood passed on, and was now re-

calling them in her prayers at that hour in Scotland, far, far away ; when he for whom her whole soul yearned, lay pillowed on the earth, under the guns of the deadly pass, over which the Angel of Death was hovering with lurid eyes and dusky skin.

Thus, she did not have him always, for he would be a soldier, like his father before him. Yet the hot farewell tears of that lonely mother had sunk deep in his heart ; and if he escaped, it was for *her* sake rather than his own that he prayed to do so ; for Chieslie's was no timid heart, and there was none braver in our ranks than his when the call to battle came.

Like many others there, perhaps Daljarroch's thoughts were of a woman too. 'To-morrow,' thought he, 'may end my troubles, and leave Augusta a widow—she who hissed her hatred' (let us hope it was but fancied hatred) 'at me—free to be wooed and won by—another !'

In that thought, with all the memory of their terrible parting, there was a bitterness beyond death.

In slumber, however uneasy, there is at least forgetfulness ; yet to poor Duncan, kind angels somewhat delusively seemed to whisper hope in dreams, as he lay with a rug and plaid rolled round the steel basket-hilt of his claymore for a pillow.

Augusta seemed to come before him—she was close to his side. What she said he knew not, in the confusion and wild tumult of the time ; but to him it appeared, by the expression of her beautiful eyes, that her defiant pride was dying in her heart ; and as her tears fell, he closed their white lids with tender kisses.

When again her eyes met his, they had all the sweet solemnity of pure and perfect love in them.

'Augusta—my own—my wife !' he murmured, and a sound responded—a sound there was no mistaking.

The great war-pipes were sounding the 'Gathering' in front of the Highland lines, and the whole division got under arms in the darkness of the early morning, after the general and his staff had taken their departure to the front.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PEIWAR KHOTAL PASS.

WITH much rumbling of wheels, clatter of hoofs, steel scabbards, chain bridles, loose rammers and sponges, from the ranks of the artillery force, the brigade—the second—to which our friends belonged quitted the camp, and moved off in the gloom under a cloudy, dark, and moonless sky, that seemed to brood over a desolate expanse; the wind was still, with a calm that seemed the harbinger of death, though strong gusts swept at times through the hollows between the hills, with a moaning sound.

The brigade consisted of four field and horse guns, a mountain-battery, the Duke of Albany's Own, the 2nd Punjaub Infantry, 5th Ghoorkas—fierce little warriors in Scots-checked bonnets, dark as mahogany, supple as eels, active ascats, and armed with their murderous native *cookeries*, in addition to their bayonets and rifles—the 29th, and subsequently the 5th Punjaub regiments of infantry.

'Where the deuce *are* we going?' grumbled Crawford, who had fallen in, cheroot in mouth, to guard that avenue against the chill of the bleak and early morning.

'Haven't the least idea, replied an officer near him, with an irrepressible shiver and yawn.

'Who are in front—the first brigade, of course?'

'No; the Afghans only, as we shall soon find out, I hope.'

'We'll read all about it in the papers some months hence,' said Daljarroch, 'and *then* we shall know what we are doing and what we have done.'

'But the first brigade——' persisted Cosmo.

'Is to open the ball, I expect; a little time, and we shall know everything.'

But in reality the intention of the general was, that the second brigade, which had eventually harder service to do,

and much more rifle and bayonet work, though less exposed to heavy artillery fire, was to turn the Afghan position by the Spin Ghai or White Cow Pass, and if possible get into the enemy's *rear*, and threaten his line of retreat, by ten o'clock on the morning of the 2nd December.

A certain amount of risk and probable failure of cohesion always attend combined movements ; but in a country like Afghanistan, intersected by steep and lofty mountains, dark and deep ravines, and rocky chasms, through which, at times, brawl furious and swollen torrents, they become doubly doubtful and perilous.

This was felt by the second brigade, when the time came that they were hardly pressed by the foe, and no efficient aid could be given.

The march lay for miles along the stony bed of a mountain *nullah*, and the difficulties experienced by the troops and the elephants drawing the guns and waggons, when stumbling and toiling over such a ground, may be imagined but not described, heavily accoutred as the soldiers were ; yet ever and anon, to cheer them on their weary way, the bagpipes woke the echoes of that terrible ravine for the first time.

And now to describe the position about to be assailed by a couple of brigades of her Majesty's troops and a few pieces of artillery.

From the camp which they left, a road wound to the pass known as the Peiwar Khotal, for a distance of two *cos*s, or miles. Upon a natural barrier or saddle at the summit of this pass, about a hundred yards wide, the Afghans had formed a battery armed with cannon, so as to rake its entire length. On either side of this rocky barrier are two steep hills, and on these were more guns to make a sharp and triple cross-fire with those on the Khotal.

A lofty and impending cliff, called the Crow's Nest, on the right front of the foe, formed a chief post from whence the entire pass—a thousand yards wide—could be swept by a storm of musketry.

The troops of the Ameer, under Kaman Khan, occupied the entire line of the upper hills, extending for four miles along their giddy crests ; and at each extremity were more brass and steel rifled guns to prevent their flanks being turned.

The whole position, then, was composed of steep and all but inaccessible mountains, which would cover the line of retreat towards Cabul, and which it was the object of General Roberts to pierce at all hazards, though he could barely put three thousand men in line—a 'handful,' as opposed to the vast masses of the enemy.

The morning was advancing ; the troops were still struggling silently onward and upward in the dark, when the sudden and simultaneous explosion of two rifles in the Sepoy ranks, as a treacherous signal to the enemy of the British advance—an explosion that found an echo in Oliphant's heart—a signal agreed upon with Abdoollah Khan—was followed by the subsequent desertion of eighteen native soldiers, who actually returned to camp, whither they no doubt believed they would be followed by all their dusky comrades !

A few muttered execrations followed what was generally supposed to be an accident consequent to men with loaded arms stumbling over rough ground ; but a few minutes after, day came in with its usual tropical rapidity, revealing the whole line of the Afghan position, while heavy banks of cloud that overhung the vast peaks of the loftier range of the Safid Koh, or White Mountain, towering skyward far beyond it, warned the leaders that whatever was to be done, should be done quickly, more especially as snow was seen on the ranges to the northward ; and that an unusual source of alarm might not be wanting, a smart shock of an earthquake had been felt along the line of march.

As the troops were yet slowly moving on, every field-glass was bent on the heights, where swords and bayonets were bristling and flashing, with many other steely points, as the morning sun came up in his glory from beyond the mountain

ranges that look down on Peshawur ; and Charlie's binocular enabled him to remark the cannoneers of the Ameer with their Prussian-like *pickelhaubes*, the regular state troops of Cabul in their odd uniforms, with loose puggerees set defiantly on one side of the head, and picturesque groups and clouds of tribal foot and horse swarming at every point.

The former, the old *juzailchees*—armed with a long kind of gun carrying a ball double the range of the old musket, fired from a fork or rest, and with their little spade for excavating a rifle pit—are clad in loose garments of all colours ; and the latter, the cavaliers, wear a simple turban of dyed linen, called a *loongee*, seven yards in length, one end of which, in cold weather or in the field, is used for the double purpose of warmth and as a protection against a sabre-cut, when wound round the throat.

The cummerbund of the wild Cabul horseman is of the same material and description. His *koorta*, or shirt, is fastened down the right side, and so buttoned or looped that no part of the body is seen, such being in Mahometan countries reckoned indecorous and scandalous, so it is difficult to conceive what they think of our Scottish Highlanders. Over all is worn a *caftan*, but more generally a *chogka*, or ample cloak made of broadcloth or camel's hair. Loose trousers, with boots to the knee, complete the dress of all ranks, the colours being usually dark-green, brown, or black—red or yellow not being esteemed for outer garments ; yet most varied in hue and costume seemed the wild and picturesque groups that manned the formidable rocks of the Peiwar Khotal on that chill 2nd of December.

The arms of the horsemen are sabres fastened round the waist ; a gun with flint lock, or perhaps a rifle of precision now, with a bayonet in general permanently fixed to the muzzle ; ammunition often carried in bullet-bags and horns : and a round shield, invariably slung over the back when not wanted for combat, completes their general equipment, though many carry a number of other weapons.

The lesser hills below the Khotal are densely covered with stunted oaks and holly-bushes ; and at half-past five, in the morning, struggling through these, a party of the 5th Ghoorkas, gallantly led by Major Fitzhugh, stormed a stockade held by an advanced picket of the enemy, who were evidently taken by surprise ; but the path beyond was skilfully barred at an interval of every hundred yards by fresh stockades, yet, by the time the sun was fairly up, the enemy had been fully driven with slaughter from these, though their retreat was covered by heavy firing from the adjacent hills, while ever and anon, in the clear blaze of the morning, great white clouds of smoke gushed from the black cannons' mouth between the solid embrasures of turf and earth, and on every hand the killed and wounded were falling fast now.

The roar of battle, with all its terrible grandeur of sound—its majesty, was now reverberating among those stupendous mountain ranges as the columns of attack closed up, hundreds of irregular spirts of smoke indicating the fighting line of our skirmishers from two great points of attack, with their supports coming up to fill the gaps made by the fallen, and the main body following next, in anticipation of the final rush.

A battle now is not what it used to be in line, when one man was aiming, another ramming down tight his cartridge, a third coming to the present, a fourth firing or pricking his vent ; some kneeling to get a steady shot at an enemy hidden in smoke, the doomed falling, and the wounded being borne to the rear.

Now in close action, the roar and clatter of the breach-loaders is continuous and steady ; there is no ' casting about,' the muzzles are for ever levelled to the front ; the formation is loose, rank entire, and there is no shoulder to shoulder, or the magic ' touch of the elbow,' till perhaps the final rush.

While the Ghoorkas and Highlanders were storming the stockades, with such force, fury, and celerity as mountaineers alone could exhibit, a portion of the other brigade at six

o'clock proceeded to assail the Crow's Nest on the summit of the Khotal, the great cliff or crag referred to.

The force for this arduous service, consisting of five Royal Artillery guns under Major Parry, with the covering party of the 8th or King's, got ably into position at 3000 yards' range; and a terrible exchange of round shot and shell took place during almost the entire day. But, singular to say, the attacking party met with scarcely a casualty; and during an eight hours' fire our artillery only paused at intervals to cool their guns.

In that quarter our infantry, who were for some time beyond an effective range for their rifles, ever moving steadily forward, and pressing like a living flood, with bayonets bristling and colours flying, across the spurs of the valley, by nine a.m. reached a ridge from where, with their splendid arms of precision, they opened a dreadful fire upon the Afghan masses, whose base rested on the Crow's Nest; but at much disadvantage, for the opposite side of the valley, being covered with dense and dark-green jungle, spirts of white smoke alone indicated the spots at which to aim with the Snider or Martini-Henry. The ridge, however, was speedily evacuated by all save the dead and the dying; but the brigadier was severely wounded, and had to make over his command to the colonel of the 8th, or King's.

After various movements belonging to history rather than our simple story, the first brigade fought its way desperately close to the summit of the pass, but found a deep chasm suddenly intervening between! A hurried council of war was held, and it was decided to make an attack by the bayonet—the grand old English weapon that never fails—and the 8th went gallantly on.

They seemed to vanish into the chasm; a few moments after that the scarlet mass was seen swarming and storming up the terrible slope, colours advanced and bayonets fixed—point over point, and flashing in the sun. Many rolled clattering down, killed or wounded, into the chasm, pith helmets

falling one way and rifles another—some retaining the latter with death-tenacious grasp ; but a wild cheer announced in a moment that the place was ours, and that, from that point at least, pierced, broken, and dismayed, the faithless Afghans were hurled back in hopeless ruin and disorder.

The whole hill-slopes hereabout were strewn with dead and dying men in every conceivable position, indicative of past or present agony, together with burning tents, cannon, waggons, ammunition-boxes, every kind of Indian camp equipage, heaps of grain, and loose ample coats lined with sheepskins ; rifles, tulwars, pistols, and daggers also strewed the ground, with Afghan artillery helmets, among which was found a shabracque of the Scots Greys, affording a considerable source of speculation as to *how* it came there, as the Greys of immortal fame have never been further East than the Crimea.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHO WON THE V.C. ?

ERE all this was achieved some terrible hand-to-hand work, exactly suited to those who had to perform it, took place at the stockades between the Albany Highlanders, the Ghoorkas, and the enemy.

No less than four *sungahs* or stone-barricades—ramparts, in fact—had to be carried in succession at the point of the bayonet ; and there was a noble rivalry between the fierce little mountaineers of Nepaul and their Scottish comrades.

Now for the first time under a great fire of cannon and musketry, ere they came to the final rush, Charlie felt, once his confidence was fully restored, and the real fighting devil possessed him, that the hour had come to do something great, gallant, and brilliant, as, in his day-dreams, he had often longed to do ; but what could Du Guesclin, or Mars

himself, have done at a thousand yards' range, save run the risk of being 'potted' like the rest ?

This, however, was at first ; the Ghoorkas had carried the first stockade ; Duncan Daljarroch had the leading company of the Highlanders, and made a rush at the next.

'Come on !' he cried, brandishing his claymore ; 'let us see, my lads, who among us will first gain a Victoria Cross to-day !'

The rampart was stormed in furious style after one steady volley, the men plunging at it in the smoke—surmounting it, and leaping over it into the heart of the foe beyond, with bayonets fixed and wild cheers ; and now the fierce, wild longing to grapple with them—the actual heroism of the hand-to-hand-and-foot conflict—was gratified here to the full.

Under a fire from the third barrier, they had to engage those who had been driven from the second, and who were led by an Afghan horseman of great bravery and remarkable appearance—the chief of the Mirzan Khels. Nobly mounted, with a light-coloured *loongee* round his head, its long end floating in the air, he was one of the old school (*that* exists everywhere) of Cabul warriors, who never deemed they were in fighting order without a long, heavy juzail with a bayonet, a sabre, a blunderbuss, three long pistols, a hunting-knife, four or five others, a dagger and a shield, with a singular rigging round the waist, full of powder-flasks, bullet-bags, powder-measures, and fifty other things, all stuck in a shawl-girdle.

In addition to all these, this swarthy and bearded warrior had a long tasselled spear, of which he made terrible use, while, for a few seconds, his *juzailchees*, or riflemen, fought around him in a circle.

Over his fork, a Cabulee was taking a deliberate aim at Daljarroch, who was engaged hand-to-hand with another, when Charlie's follower, Macdonald, uttered a whoop that attracted his attention, and then assailed him with his clubbed musket.

The swing of the butt missed, whereupon Macdonald seized the Cabulee by the throat, and both rolled over each other, and the knife of the latter found a passage to the Highlander's heart.

The Cabulee now sprang up, tulwar in hand, to find himself confronted by Oliphant, burning to avenge his poor comrade. Their blades pressed against each other, and for a second—a second full of fierce thoughts and death—they glared into each other's eyes.

The Cabulee was strong and active as one of his native ponies; the great weight of his small-hilted sword, the extreme keenness of its edge, and the method of cutting peculiar to nearly all the natives of India, give the tulwar in such encounters as this an advantage over most weapons, especially the 'tailor's swords' used in our service; but Oliphant's steel-hilted claymore was a good Scottish blade, straight, fluted, supple as whalebone, and double-edged—'one of the olden time;' and adopting the ancient Highland lure of thrusting out a foot to draw attention, as the Cabulee made a terrible cut that might have taken the leg off, swift as lightning he drew it back and gave him a tremendous stroke that clove his swarthy face to the chin, and nearly his head in two.

He fairly sliced him down like a pumpkin, and in a manner that made him shudder after his blood grew cool, and for months—yea, and longer—the quivering face of the slaughtered Afghan haunted him terribly, perhaps unnecessarily at times; but no such emotion was in his heart then, and in a second he had disposed of another, in a mode quite as summary.

'*Wah, wah, sahib! Wah, wah, sahib!*' ('Well done, gentleman!') cried the Ghoorkas, who in some places were mingled pell-mell with the Highlanders.

'A spear! a spear!' cried the horseman, in his native tongue, towering above the frantic throng; 'come on! By the Prophet, *a Jehad! a Jehad!* May the mother of the Feringhees be defiled! Smear with cow's blood the face of the base Hindoos!'

A ball from Corporal Mackellar's rifle carried away some of the appurtenances at his girdle, but next moment his long spear, dripping with blood, was withdrawn from the dying Highlander's throat ; and so many bullets failed upon him, though he often reeled heavily in his saddle, that he must have worn a coat of mail, or quiltings of some mysterious kind.

The Cabulees now gave way, the horseman escaping, it was supposed, a storm of bullets as he plunged his horse down the slope among stunted oaks and hollies, while a rush was made for the next barricade, at the capture of which, Chieslie, while leading his company, was struck by a round juzail ball that entered his Highland doublet at the shoulder, and ran along the shoulder-blade, and made its exit, leaving him, as he said to Crawford, as 'if seared with hot iron ;' another smashed the opera-glasses in a leather case by his side ; but a third passed through his heart as he was on the top of the barricade, and heavily he fell flat on his face with arms and hands outspread on the bloody grass, a dead man, while with a yell of rage the Highlanders swept on to avenge him.

The fourth *sungah* too was carried brilliantly ; and at all, the Highlanders were led by their gallant lieutenant-colonel. But now the mounted warrior, the terrible chief of the Mirzan Khels, again made his appearance, seeking to rally the fugitives, seeming suddenly to issue out of the smoke in front.

He made a furious effort to transfix Charlie Oliphant with his long spear ; but swiftly raised its point and passed him.

Face to face again, there was no mistaking that horseman now ; and a glance, quick as light, enabled him to recognise the ocean waif, his ex-khitmutgar—Abdoollah Khan !

His presence caused a momentary rally, in which Crawford pistoled a Cabulee who had sent a bullet right through his helmet, just a little above the forehead. An inch lower, and it must have killed him. Confused, he staggered, whirled round, and was beaten to the earth, where he would have

been cut to pieces, had not Daljarroch, though staggering with a bullet in his right thigh, rushed back to his rescue, confronting five Cabulees at once.

Two he shot down ere they could reload ; he smashed the face of the third with his revolver, blinding him in his own blood, and was about to attack the rest, when a few of the Highlanders came rushing that way through the smoke ; the Cabulees fled, and Duncan, though now scarcely able to stand, assisted his comrade to rise.

Cosmo looked very pale, but said with a laugh :

‘ You have saved my life, Duncan. A narrow squeak that, through the helmet ; an inch lower, and Britain might perhaps have lost her future Wellington. But, by Jove, this is no time for jesting.’

‘ I think not, Cosmo—even for you,’ said Duncan, wincing with agony, while a soldier tied, as a ligature, a handkerchief round his limb, to stanch the blood which had deluged his tartan trews.

Some more severe wood-fighting continued after this ; then opposition ceased as the night fell, and the Afghans were in full flight to Cabul, leaving eighteen fine pieces of brass and steel ordnance behind them, and a vast number of killed and wounded. Communication between the two brigades being fully established, early next morning tents and commissariat stores arrived, and most welcome they were to the half-frozen and half-starved troops, who had neither rested nor eaten since they quitted their camp. They had been twenty consecutive hours on the move, with seven hours of incessant climbing and fighting.

Charlie and Crawford when they met next morning, after returning from a species of pursuit or night patrol towards the enemy, shook hands, as they sat down to a slice of potted meat and biscuit, with a tinful of brandy pawnee.

‘ Poor Chieslie !’ said the former, after a pause ; ‘ you remember his song—so sweet, and sad, and full of the *mal au pays* ? His presentiment has come true.’

‘A gloomy one it was ! Yet he did his duty like a man—brave even to rashness !’

‘I wonder who won a V.C. yesterday ?’

‘Hard to say ; but poor Daljarroch has gone to the rear with his wound. I owe my life to Duncan ; with all his quietude, he is brave as a lion, and when his blood is up and he hears the pipes, he would face even the black devil himself in his shirt-sleeves.’

‘I shall look after Duncan in time ; but meanwhile must see to the body of poor Chieslie,’ said Charlie ; ‘and I have done nothing to win even honourable mention in a despatch,’ he added, as he thought of Auriel.

As yet, the British casualties were not known ; save that they were estimated at far less than those of the routed enemy.

But among others slain were two greatly regretted by the whole column—Major Anderson of the 23rd Pioneers, and Captain Kelso of the Royal Artillery—two officers of the highest merit and greatest bravery. As the dawn of the next day stole in, the troops became infuriated on finding how many of the fallen had been mutilated by the Turis and other barbarous tribes. ‘I have already,’ says one writer from the camp, ‘mentioned the treatment which Major Anderson received at the hands of the enemy ; but it may still be worth recording, in connection with that melancholy circumstance, that the exasperation produced against the Cabulees among his brother officers was intense—so much so, that the old surgeon-major of the 23rd Pioneers loaded his double-barrelled gun with slug-shot, and went about vowing destruction to every Cabulee. The doctor was a great personal friend of Major Anderson, and his rage did him credit, although perhaps it had one little tinge of the ludicrous about it to those who did not understand the depth and sincerity of his feelings. On that day when the mutilated remains of Major Anderson was discovered, the life of any Cabulee would not have been worth much purchase if he had en-

countered on the field either man or officer of the 23rd Pioneers.' Kelso had been shot dead while giving some orders to his battery ; but Anderson's death was occasioned thus. Hearing that a party of another regiment was sorely pressed by the foe, he had dashed into the pine forest to its aid with a few of the 23rd Pioneers, who were all shot down, while he fell wounded ; but disdaining to fly, he fought sword in hand till he was slain, and then his dead body was dishonoured by the barbarous Afghans.

It was therefore with many dark misgivings and anticipations of something horrible and revolting, that Charlie Olyphant and Crawford, with four Highlanders, set out for the scene of the captured *sungahs*, to search for the body of Walter Chieslie.

All the white dusty path up which they had toiled under fire, at the summit of the White Cow Pass, was encumbered by dead, who had been stripped by the Turis (a tribe of the Pathan race), whose fighting men number five thousand ; their sharp *charahs* or knives had been horribly busy in the work of mutilation, and nothing had been left with the dead Sepoys but their simple amulet—a *mantra* from the Koran or Shastres tied round an arm, a coin or cord of silk at the neck.

In the still and silent forest of stupendous pines and cedars, covering the hill of the Peiwar ridge, there was imparted something of awful solemnity by the number of nude dead bodies, among which the then snow-white skin indicated here and there a European, but of what regiment nothing remained to show, so busy had those death-hawks, the Turis, been over-night.

The golden rays of the sun darted down in steady streams of light on the scattered corpses, between the sombre branches ; but save the twitter of birds, such as the thrush and the *cuph* of the Afghans, no sound was there, for the wounded had all perished, or been borne away.

Among the stormed *sungahs* the dead were untouched.

Here and there lay a Highlander in his scarlet uniform and red tartan trews, so easily distinguished from the dark Sepoy and darker Ghoorka ; but thick and in literal heaps lay the Afghans, piled man over man in some places. And such is the advance of progress now, that Charlie saw more than one of their leaders lying dead, with a very orthodox field-glass—of Russian manufacture, probably—slung outside his caftan.

Something like a gasping sigh escaped him and his friend when they came to where poor young Walter Chieslie lay dead on his face. His pith helmet had fallen off, and his closely-shorn dark-brown hair, was whitened by the thick hoar-frost which then, at that hour and season, powdered everything.

Placid he would have looked as if asleep, but for the fixed staring glare of the half-open eyes, and withal marvellously handsome was the pale face of him who sang so sweetly in Daljarroch's tent but a few short hours before—the widow's only son, 'her beautiful, her brave.'

'For his mother, Charlie,' said Crawford, as he took Chieslie's watch, ring, and claymore ; 'God help her !'

'I suppose this is her portrait, sir?' said one of the Highlanders, as a photo in a locket fell from his breast.

'Yes,' said Crawford ; 'it is so.'

The soldier replaced it, and buttoned the dead man's doublet over it.

'That is right, my good fellow ; we'll bury it with him.'

'Puir body ! she'll hae a sair heart when she reads the news o' yesterday's awfu' wark !' said the soldier, as he reverently covered Chieslie's face with his tartan shoulder-plaid—or plaid-scarf, as the Cockney tailors call it.

The body was then borne away on a blanket, stretched between two rifles, by two of the Albany Highlanders, while Oliphant desired the others to see his servant, poor Donald, interred in the same grave with Corporal Mackellar, who had a terrible lance-wound in his throat, and who, but three days before, had remitted through the paymaster a little sum in

rupees—all he could save—to his father, the evicted tenant of Fairy Rock Farm.

At four o'clock that evening the bodies of Chieslie and two other officers who were slain were interred in one grave, dug in the forest on the steep mountain-side, half a mile distant from the camp, in presence of all the troops off duty. The general acted as chief mourner of the three, and six officers of the regiment to which each of the dead belonged stepped slowly beside the stretchers, Crawford and Charlie among those by the side of Chieslie.

Solemnly soughed the wind of the winter eve through the dark and sombre forest, which was composed of those vast mountain pines peculiar to the country, remarkable for cones larger than artichokes, and seeds like pistachio nuts; and those who in that place, and on that occasion, heard the wail of the Scottish funeral march, 'The Land o' the Leal,' so slowly played by the kilted pipers of the Albany Highlanders, will never forget the impression it made upon them.

At last all was over; the on-lookers replaced their helmets and turned away, leaving the dead in their lonely and unmarked graves.

On returning to headquarters, Oliphant found himself under orders to convey to the rear the wounded, who were all to be placed in the Khoorum Fort; and with the dhoolies, stretchers, and ambulance waggons, and a little party who were to be added to the strength of the force in the fort, he set out on this melancholy mission, with orders to rejoin without delay, previous to an advance to Shutargardan. But unfortunate Charlie! He little foresaw the troubles that were in store for him ere again he found himself with his comrades.

None knew as yet who had won a V. C., and opinions varied much as to whether one had been won at all; though common rumour said it was due to Cooke of the 5th Ghoorkas, for rescuing the deputy adjutant-general in that terrible *mêlée* in which young Munro, of the Albany Highlanders, was wounded.

Among those borne to the rear was Duncan Daljarroch, in a dhooley, by four native bearers. The ball, which had lodged in the fleshy part of his thigh, occasioned him exquisite torture, as it defied alike probes and forceps; the wound was simply dressed by bandages, and he went to the rear with the rest—many miserable, sorely mutilated, and helpless creatures—in care of Surgeon-major Marrowbone of the Medical Staff, a short, paunchy, and irritable little man. And Charlie Oliphant, mounted on a very handsome horse, taken in the action, rode by the side of the dhooley to cheer Duncan, and to talk over the past, and if possible, the future.

As the sick train quitted the camp they could see a gallows in [process of erection, whereon was to be hanged, in front of the whole troops, a Sepoy—one of those to whom Abdoollah Khan had given the Ameer's proclamation, and who had fired his rifle in the dark as a signal of our advance against the Peiwar Khotal.

A searching investigation had been made, and a court-martial held, and many other Sepoys had been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, varying from one to fourteen years, while various desertions, accompanied with the theft of arms and ammunition, that occurred soon after, proved that Abdoollah's efforts at dissuasion had not been in vain, and that a stern example was necessary.

Days elapsed; the regiment, with the rest of the column, moved beyond the pass and towards the Great Khost Valley which lies on the left of it, but Charlie Oliphant did not reappear at headquarters.

His horse had been found by a cavalry patrol, shot and floating in a shallow part of the Khoorum river, which was then, however, swollen by melting snow.

Could he have missed the ford in the flooded stream? The awful catastrophe by which a squadron of the 10th Hussars perished in a dark night, when missing a ford, had not yet

occurred ; neither had the still more recent barbarous assassination by the Oruzaies of the gallant young Lieutenant Kinloch of the Bengal Cavalry—a son of Kinloch of Logie, and formerly of the Gordon Highlanders—when caught alone on duty on the road towards Khoodum ; but from the lawless nature of the country, the worst was feared for poor Charlie.

Thoughts of the Mirzan Khels, the Turis, the Ghilzies, suggested themselves grimly to all, with the dread of a helpless and terrible death—a death perhaps without other grave than the beaks of the kites and fangs of the wolves accorded ; and a longing for vengeance pervaded the ranks of the Albany Highlanders.

Nothing was known with certainty, save that he had quitted the Khoodum Fort on his return journey, on a certain day, now long since past !

‘ Such fellows are hard to kill,’ said Cosmo Crawford ; but ere long, even hope began to die in his cheerful heart, and he often caught himself saying, when alone, ‘ Poor Charlie ! poor Charlie ! even Chieslie’s fate was a better one than this ;’ and he applied himself to his cherished briar-root, his constant friend and comfort in all afflictions.

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHARLIE LOSES HIS WAY.

DUNCAN DALJARROCH was in so low a condition that Oliphant was loth to leave him, and lingered in the Khoodum Fort a day longer than, perhaps, he should have done.

On his miserable *charpoy* or native bed, the patient snatched occasional intervals of sleep—dozing rather—with ghastly dreams of storming the *sungahs* again, with the wild,

fierce impulses of the time, and the headlong rush from barrier to barrier, feeling how

‘That must be a mighty minute
That has the soul of a crowd within it.’

Some people are very ingenious in the art of self-torment, and Daljarroch was one of these, especially when he lay helpless with his wound, and incipient fever, in a gloomy vaulted chamber of the Khoorum Fort, where a kind of loop-hole, rather than a window, gave him from his pillow a distant view of the Safid Koh, covered with snow, or partly hidden in mist.

If he were invalided and sent home, he surmised that the remittances he could at present empower his agents to give Lady Augusta would cease, of a necessity, with his Indian pay and allowances. If he died, she would have only the pension of a captain’s widow—equal to the wages of Mademoiselle Fleurette ; but, when able, he would write to his brother Willie, imploring him as the Willie of the old time, when they shared the same bed, conned the same tasks, and dwelt in love and amity together at their father’s hearth, to accord a suitable provision to a widow so high in rank, though that provision might only lead to her more speedily becoming the wife of another.

‘Perhaps I have been deceiving myself,’ he muttered, as he tossed restlessly on the *charpoy* ; ‘her indifference of me may have been assumed—oh yes, it must have been ! Knowing the difference of our rank in life and our disposition, I was too abrupt in quitting her presence on that day ; but she was so proud—so cold to me—not permitting a gleam of interest in me to escape her. So beautiful and accomplished too—a wife and yet no wife, though mine by the laws of God and man.’

It was while these thoughts agitated him, that Charlie heard his friend say impatiently :

‘You can’t get the ball out, doctor?’

‘It is not a ball,’ said Dr. Marrowbone, curtly.

‘What then?’

'A slug of lead or iron,' said the surgeon-major of the 23rd Pioneers who stood by.

'And you can't get it out, Marrowbone?' repeated Duncan.

'Not yet, apparently; the forceps——'

'Then for heaven's sake, leave me alone; the agony to which you have put me by probing is maddening; so I would rather you left it where it is.'

'But you may never have the full use of your limb,' said Dr. Marrowbone, glancing at a couple of orderlies who passed the room-door, with a basketful of recently amputated legs, arms, hands, and fingers; 'besides, the risk of leaving it where it is, is very great.'

'Do you think that I am in any danger, doctor?' asked Daljarroch; 'not that I am afraid to die.'

'Danger—aw——' said the little doctor, pulling his nether lip meditatively: 'indeed I fear there is a little danger, for despite the loss of blood, your pulse is high and feverish—high and feverish—very!'

'It is caused by agitation of the mind,' sighed Duncan, half to himself.

'No; it is that infernal slug, which defies all my skill.'

'Well, as I said before, let it alone.'

'But the wound may gangrene; we don't know of what base metal the slug may be. And if the fever should prove symptomatic——'

'What then?'

'The worst may happen, my dear sir; it might be impossible to save you—go off the hooks in a jiffey!' said the little doctor, taking snuff.

Daljarroch remained silent, and pressed Charlie's hand.

'If you have any worldly affairs to settle——' began the consoler again.

'For a mere shot in the leg!—pshaw! Besides, my agents in Scotland have settled all for me,' he added in a lower voice, thinking only of Augusta and his mother. 'Happen what may, doctor,' said he after a pause, 'I hope the lessons

I learned at my dear old mother's knee have taught me to resign myself to the divine will without repining.'

'A most creditable mood of mind,' said the doctor; 'and you know——' but the rest was lost in the mouth of a flask at which he took a good pull, and the contents of which are a sovereign soothing alike to irritable and philosophical temperaments.

He then lighted a cheroot, and departed to visit other patients, of whom he had more than enough, for fever and cholera, ague and poor fellows suffering from past cases of sun-stroke, were not wanting to fill his lists at the time, and the pits also, that were ever and anon dug hard by.

The troops were to move into the Khost Valley, we have said—a post nearer that mirage, 'the scientific frontier,' wherever it may be; Charlie knew that he must now, without further delay, quit the Khoorum Fort for the Peiwar Pass, some sixteen miles or so distant.

He took—under all the circumstances—a sad farewell of Duncan Daljarroch, from whom he had not been separated for some five years or so, and set out on his lonely way without a guide; and the state in which he left his friend would, he knew, infallibly prove a fresh obstacle to his chances of hearing, even indirectly, tidings of Auriel, or she of him.

By this catastrophe—a troublesome and probably protracted ailment from a gunshot wound—a greater gulf than ever seemed to have yawned between him and her, as it might be long before Daljarroch rejoined his regiment.

He examined his revolver and ammunition, looked to his claymore being loose in its sheath, brought his long regimental dirk well round to hand, inspected the girths and bridle of his horse, which was one of that excellent breed reared in the district of Herat; and then he rode on leisurely about sunrise.

At first he felt rising in his heart a certain chivalric love of adventure, not unmixed with a vague sense of danger; he was so isolated and lonely in that savage land, when he left

the Khoorum Fort behind him, and turned his horse's head towards the solitude.

He knew that travelling alone was most perilous work, as nearly every straggler from the army—even when on the line of march—was killed without mercy. In one day no less than twenty fell thus, assassinated by juzailchees, or riflemen, concealed in the rocks. We may remind the reader how, about this very time, the public prints teemed with accounts of the bitter feeling excited in our camp in the Khoorum Valley, by the murder of more than one Ghoorka soldier when peacefully fishing in the river that flows through it.

One of these we are told, 'intent on his sport, was bending over the water, when his murderer, stealing up behind him, nearly cut his head from his body at the first blow. A second and a third, laying open the scalp and cheek respectively, followed rapidly. Then, as the unhappy man rolled towards the river, he was stabbed above the groin. All his property had been plundered, cookerie, haversack, etc. ; and who the murderer was remained a mystery.' But the Ghoorkas vowed that when the time for vengeance came at the Peiwar Khotal, they would not forget their comrade's murder ; nor did they.

The risk run by a single traveller there is enhanced by the many wild animals that lurk in the woods and recesses of the Afghan mountains. Lions are very rare, but tigers, leopards, hyænas, and wolves abound. Yet Charlie thought only of human enemies as he rode onward over the rough, steep, and hilly ground at an easy pace, and keeping his horse well in hand for a swift and sudden start ; and keeping also a sharp look-out as each successive long grassy glen or rocky *nullah* opened up to view on his right or left.

But the country seemed utterly lonely, though here and there some sheep—the Persian *doombas*, with fat tails a foot broad—browsed on the hill-slopes, thus hinting that the warm black camlet or blanket-tents of their owners could not be far off, and were, if possible, to be avoided.

The blue Khoorum flowed peacefully along its broad bed, affording he knew excellent mahser fishing ; and already, as a sportsman, Charlie knew there was good small-game shooting in the valley, and in the Peiwar Khotal pheasants, ibex, bears, and panthers : but, as yet, all ammunition had been reserved for the Afghans.

He had ridden some miles before a suspicion flashed upon him that he had unconsciously gone the wrong way.

By that time he should have seen the peaks of the Peiwar Khotal Pass, and those above Shutargardan (or the Camel's Neck) in a line, which they were not ; and a green mound, which marked where some hundreds of men and horses slain in some old tribal conflict lay, had not as yet been passed by him ; nor did certain other landmarks answer to his memory of them.

In doubt, he reined up his horse and looked about him. A solitary eagle was perched on a rock between him and the sky ; and here and there that beautiful partridge, the hill *chuchore* of India whirred up out of the long grass.

He saw as usual the remote peaks of the Safid Koh, but these proved no particular guide to him just then.

To advance was as dangerous as to retreat, as he *might* go from bad to worse ; as for one man who might prove, if bribed, a friendly guide, he would be certain to meet ten enemies.

While looking about him irresolutely, certain patches of rice-field met his eye, with some irrigation channels leading thereto. These tokens of civilisation he followed round the shoulder of a grassy hill, and found a little village of mud-walled houses occupied by Jajis (a small tribe), and fortunately, he thought, as they are deemed favourable to the British, for, having been sorely oppressed by the Ameer, Shere Ali, they had repeatedly besought British assistance, and implored the Indian Government to annex their territories for protection.

As Charlie urged his horse slowly up the only and central street (down the middle of which, as usual in these parts, a

hill-stream was rushing to meet the Khoorum), he was in doubt who to address, and how to make his wants known, while men, women, and children came out to stare at him in wonder.

The men—all hawk-nosed, eagle-eyed, savage and unkempt-like fellows—as usual in Afghan towns and villages, were all well-armed, and having apparently nothing to do but smoke and look after their weapons. The women and children all wore blue cotton tunics, and trousers of a species of mud-colour, and looked squalid, dirty and hungry.

Charlie, to win a little favour, threw a handful of annas, kusiras, and other small coins among the children—who, after a pause of blank astonishment—made a scramble therefor, but with no word of thanks ; and the moment the coins had left his hand, the donor feared he had made a mistake, as this display was greatly calculated to excite the cupidity of the villagers, and lead to some disaster.

Beckoning towards him a man, who approached slowly, sullenly, and distrustfully, Charlie said mechanically in English, with such broken Hindostanee as he had been able to pick up from Abdoollah when in his service, but making signs at the same time, that he wanted a guide to the camp at the Peiwar Khotal, and—unseen by the rest—showed him a *tilla*, or little Afghan gold coin, worth about twelve shillings.

The man's black eyes brightened as a fierce kind of gleam shot athwart them. He knew not a word that Charlie uttered save the name of the pass, and gathered therefrom, and from the proffered gold, that he wanted a guide.

He pointed to the roadway, and Charlie nodded his head. He next said something about the Peiwar Khotal, and pointed in the direction where Charlie thought it must lie, so the latter assented again ; on which the Afghan gave him a very low salaam, and while an expression of profound cunning and cruelty too came into his eyes, he slung over his shoulder his long, heavy juzail, and mounted his *yaboo*, or Cabulee pony,

and beckoning our hero to follow him, proceeded up the bed of the stream that flowed through the village.

The armed loiterers in the latter, for some reason not difficult to discover, seemed resolved to oppose this movement ; but, by a haughty wave of his hand, a fierce word or two, and figuratively slapping the peculiarly-formed butt of his Afghan rifle, the guide repelled any interference ; and Charlie, not without some anxiety, found they were permitted to get clear of the village without any brawl, and to descend a slope towards what appeared a *dusht* or plain, but which was in reality intersected by many deep and dangerous ravines.

Charlie perceived that his guide struck out in a direction different to that which he had himself pursued, so far as related to the position and bearings of the Safid Koh ; and aware that the man had to all appearances protected him from the menaced attack of the villagers, he began to feel a little confidence in him, for as yet he was altogether ignorant that the 'friendly Afghan, aware that the plunder of all he possessed would not be worth a rupee each among all in the village (the horse excepted), conceived that, when they reached a convenient distance from the latter, by one well-directed ball from his *juzail*, he might make himself master of everything—the Feringhee sahib's horse and harness, clothes, arms, purse, and trinkets.

Albeit that the Jajis wished British protection, their cupidity *had* been excited, and Charlie had run the narrowest risk of massacre at their hands.

CHAPTER XL.

A TREACHEROUS GUIDE.

BOTH being mounted, Charlie thought three or four hours' riding should certainly bring them close to the camp ; but

by no hint or sign could he prevail upon his new companion to urge his shaggy pony beyond a very slow and provoking species of walk, though it seemed to be a mettlesome enough little animal, active, wiry, and strong, as all mountain ponies are.

Charlie Oliphant looked covertly from time to time at the Afghan, and found the latter still more covertly eyeing him with a sly and stealthy expression, the reverse of pleasing or reassuring.

He wore a bright yellow loongee of ample proportions, the end of which floated over his left shoulder ; a shawl, coarse and tattered by sword-cuts or bullets apparently, was twisted about his body, covering a vest that probably had never been changed or removed since the first day he put it on ; he wore loose trousers, the colour of which can only be described as dirt, and the legs of which were stuffed into long brown boots. He had a long dagger and a great twisted powder-horn, with a bag of bullets at his leather girdle.

His matchlock juzail, with a barrel nearly six feet long, was slung across his back, with his little target, on which were four brass bosses. His features were expressive of indescribable cunning, ferocity, covetousness, hypocrisy, and all manner of falsehood—a man who had hunted his enemies from hill to hill, and been hunted by them in turn.

An enemy at heart of the Feringhee, and yet as destitute of patriotism as a Whitechapel rough ; and doubtless he could endure hunger, thirst, heat, and cold with marvellous indifference, while able to track his foe like one of his native panthers, run like an antelope, and take—while lurking unseen—deadly pot-shots over the prong of his long, clumsy rifle.

Charlie made a shift to ask him what tribe he belonged to, and he had the hardihood and confidence to reply gruffly :

‘A Mirzan Khel.’

‘A pleasant tribe to have a companion from,’ thought Charlie.

After this, as if the exasperating pace of his pony was not slow enough, he manifested a propensity to loiter, lag, and drop behind, instead of leading the way.

This roused the suspicion of Oliphant, who, though he had meant to reward him with more than the golden *tilla*, a princely pay for an Afghan mountaineer accustomed to cowrie-shells as a circulating medium (at about the tenth of a penny each), he now inwardly resolved that he would not give the surly fellow a fraction more.

The path wound through a narrow dell, the grassy sides of which rose steeply and abruptly up on each side ; and as their cattle could not proceed abreast, the Afghan deliberately pulled his rein and dropped behind.

Charlie, watchful, now looked round, but his guide was riding quietly along, with his eyes fixed apparently on his pony's ears, his knees up to the bow of his saddle, so short were his stirrups, and an expression of as perfect unconsciousness on his fierce dark-bearded face as his features could assume.

When again Charlie looked back, he found that the distance between them had increased ; that noiselessly, swift as light, the Afghan had unslung his long juzail, and had blown the match till it was flaming red. All that followed occurred quick as thought, swift as a lightning-flash.

He levelled the weapon full at Charlie Oliphant, who for a moment saw the round black muzzle covering him ; there was a puff and a click as the matchlock flashed in the pan, and ere the ruffian could reprime from his clumsy powder-horn, Charlie had wheeled his horse round, and was upon him sword in hand.

Raising himself in his stirrups, with a malediction hissing through his set teeth—for he was infuriated by his narrow escape from death at a coward's hand—he dealt the Afghan one tremendous blow from his claymore full upon the caput, severing several folds of the loongee, but failing to penetrate to the skull, apparently.

However, the weight and fury of the blow served his purpose ; for, struck from the saddle, without a cry the Afghan, with all his accoutrements clattering, fell heavily on the sod, with arms outstretched, and lay, lifeless apparently, as if dead.

Whether he was so or not, Charlie neither cared nor stopped to inquire, but rode up the ravine, his breast panting with rage, and his mind oppressed by sudden doubt as to whether his pretended guide had not misled him, and thus he might now be farther than ever from the camp, which the Mirzan Khel had certainly intended he should never reach.

It was evident now to Charlie that if he reached it at all, he must trust to his own instincts and without a guide. He had now arrived at the upper end of the long narrow dell ; he saw his late pretended guide scrambling into the saddle, and reslinging his long juzail. He shook his right hand in menace, and urging his shaggy *yaboo* to terrible speed, instead of coming, as Charlie thought he would do, in pursuit and to seek for vengeance, he spurred it up the steep side of the ravine, and vanished ; but Charlie had not seen the last of him, though he hoped so.

From the upper end of the dell he reined in his horse, and looked around him to study intently the features of the country. The solitude was intense ; nothing living seemed near him but a huge kite having a dry bath in the dust of the bridle-path, a lizard crawling up a rock, and a small serpent gliding away into the long grass.

He saw not a vestige of the Khoorum, ten miles north of which lay the camp, but a monotonous succession of ravines, interspersed with—or rather studded by—little groves of stunted oaks and mastic-trees. The summit of the inevitable Safid Koh, usually visible thereabout from any point, had vanished ; it was completely hidden in mist.

The latter was descending fast, like a crape curtain, upon the lesser hills ; a little time, and it would shroud all the district, adding to his great perplexity : and as Charlie looked

at his watch and found midday had passed, his anxiety redoubled, for it was as vain to think of returning to the Khoorum Fort, as to hope for reaching the camp.

He calculated that nearly an hour must elapse before the mist was upon him ; the path he pursued, though it descended into another long, narrow dell, seemed a more than usually beaten one, and must lead to somewhere : perhaps to the Peiwar Khotal, and thus to the camp. He prayed that it might ; and as that part of the world was but sparingly supplied with good or friendly citizens, he once again inspected his weapons and harness, and preparing himself, as well he might, for any chance and any encounter, he shortened his reins to keep his Heratee horse well in hand, and rode forward at an easy pace.

While passing a little tope or grove of trees, his horse's quick ears detected something—Charlie knew not what ; but it manifested soon after signs of great uneasiness, which the rider sought to soothe by voice and hand, patting his neck familiarly.

An unmistakable sound of growling and crunching among the jungle was followed by the appearance of a couple of wolves rending a dead horse, a sight so appalling that Oliphant had scarcely need to put the spur to the animal he rode, as it darted away at a hand gallop, snorting and panting as it did so, and the grove was soon left behind ; but the episode made the wanderer more than ever anxious to see the white tents of General Roberts's camp, as what he had seen was a forcible example of perils among these mountains as yet unthought of by him.

The ravine through which he was now proceeding became narrower, steeper ; and at an angle of the path through it he saw suddenly, about a hundred yards in front of him, that it was barred—barricaded by a regular *sungah*, composed of some felled trees, turf, and stones ; and two Afghans, well-armed, after exchanging whoops and cries, as if inviting the presence of others, came hurrying down to man the barrier,

which had probably been erected in expectation of some *kafila*, or caravan, that must pass that way.

Charlie's heart for a moment stood still, and he thought of wheeling round his horse, and galloping in the direction from whence he had come; but several horsemen were riding up the ravine now in his rear, and among them unmistakably the Mirzan Khel on his shaggy pony, with the end of his long yellow loongee floating behind him. In front was this unexpected barrier, with two ruffians blowing their matches behind it. In his rear were perils greater still!

Both fired, and Charlie's helmet was nearly knocked off his head by one bullet which went through it, yet the chain retained it. His revolver rid him of one assailant; and giving free rein to his horse, he lifted its head with the bit, applied the spur, and beautifully leaped it clear over the barrier. But as it came down on the other side, the second Afghan, supple as an eel and fierce as a tiger, sinking under the neck of the horse, grasped the reins; and relying on their strength, he held on with all his weight, keeping himself from falling, while at the same time he completely held the animal in check.

Charlie could hear the hoofs of the rapid horses resounding in the hollow way behind him, and one of the riders shouting '*Shabash! shabash!*' ('Well done!'), while vainly he kicked, spurred, and struggled to relieve himself of the reckless ruffian who was almost under his horse, and completely barring its action, though one of its hoofs had given him a terrible gash in the forehead; yet, though half blinded in his own blood, he held on like a madman, his teeth clenched, his hot breath coming from his moustached lips like steam in the cool atmosphere.

Another shot from Charlie's revolver whistled through the brains of the frantic wretch, who was probably inflamed to a pitch of insanity by *bhang*; his fierce grasp relaxed on the reins, and the head of the horse, freed from the painful restraint, was at once elevated in the air, and his rider—escap-

ing two bullets from behind, which whistled wide of their mark—applied freely the spur, and plunged over the body of the Afghan, whose blood and brains were plastered over all the breast and bridle of the animal.

The horse bounded forward a few paces wildly, nor did his rider seek to restrain him ; ere long he struck into a steady pace, with a long swinging stride that soon left far behind the *sungah*, which the little horses of the Afghan thieves were unable to take at a flying leap as Charlie's nag had done, and thus, as they would have to make a detour if they attempted pursuit, he soon placed miles between himself and the scene of this last outrage ; and then, after dropping into an easier pace, he drew up breathless, panting and bathed in perspiration, to rest himself and the Heratee horse, for which he began to conceive quite an affection, as a faithful sharer of his danger and toil.

His first emotion was one of thankfulness that he—and his horse too—had escaped without a scratch, for a wound, even a slight one, might end in his destruction, in that land where every man's hand was uplifted against the Feringhee. He sought the shelter afforded by the space between a rock and a boulder, or mass that had fallen therefrom, and dismounting, strove to think calmly over his unexpected predicament.

The mist had come down from the mountain now, and every place was hidden from view. To attempt further progress was vain, and replete with peril. How long might this mist continue ? If for days, what then ?

Whither might he not wander helplessly, or fall—down some unfathomed chasm, perhaps ? and into whose merciless hands might not the smallest mistake lead him ?

We have said that he strove to think calmly ; but the impulse for exertion and activity were strong within him, and were restrained with difficulty.

The mist continued ; it seemed to grow dun in colour and palpable as evening drew on, and the darkness of night fell suddenly—a night that was to seem the longest in his life to

The Khels were in the act of loading the six-foot barrels of their heavy juzails, when the welcome figure of the Feringhee horseman, alone and unattended, was seen to descend to the ford and cautiously enter the stream.

'*Rabbi'lalamina!*' exclaimed one joyously, using that tremendous first word of the first chapter of the Koran, for so much are pious interjections in use among the Afghans, that they see no blasphemy in using them, even when about to commit the most odious crimes.

The speaker was Charlie's acquaintance of yesterday, he of the yellow loongee; and putting a handful of coarse powder into his juzail, then a tuft of wool as wadding, he put in another handful of iron slugs, old nails, and so forth, which were followed by a plug, and rammed home.

Some twelve or fourteen other unkempt ruffians were busy doing the same, with muttered exclamations of ferocity and joy; and when loaded, they carefully laid their barrels in the prongs or forks over which they fire them, or in crevices of the rock, to cover with deadly aim the landing-place below, where the coming traveller must quit the ford.

Daily these Khels had been in the habit of posting themselves in their eyry there, to watch for whatever Fate might send them; but this single wayfarer was of such minor importance that they did not deem it necessary to rouse their leader, who was stretched in slumber yet upon a sheepskin. 'It may be that no one comes at all, not even an ordinary traveller, at whom, rather than go home without any sport, they would have their shot,' says a writer, with reference to such an outpost as this; 'but supposing the quarry to come in earnest, a regiment of Feringhees marching by, or a convoy carefully escorted, our sportsmen, who from their state of readiness might have been expected to fire at once into the thick of them, commence a consultation. What is the object of their meeting? It is agreed at last that it was *loot*—plunder; and this being so, why, they argue, should they waste the beautiful charge with which they have just choked

up a foot of their barrels, upon a miserable British officer, or a batch of red-coats ?'

In this instance, however, there was no consultation at all ; and crouching down, they blew their matches, cocked their juzails, and waited impatiently till Charlie should be clear of the ford and on the path below.

The Khel whom he had unhorsed and baffled yesterday could not repress his longing for vengeance till that was achieved, and while covering his victim with his long barrel, the temptation to destroy proved too powerful, and overcame even his avarice.

He fired, and Charlie's horse plunged wildly in the stream as it was hit in several places, and falling away from the ford, began to drift with the current. Flashing out from among the jungle-covered rocks another and another shot followed in quick succession, till they amounted quite to an irregular volley, and the water rose in tiny spouts on every hand, while a great horror of an obscure and unavenged death mingled with rage and indignation in the heart of Charlie Oliphant.

' God help me !' he exclaimed for the third time, as his horse, riddled by bullets, sank beneath him in the stream, which was crimsoned with its blood ; and freeing his feet from the stirrups, mechanically he struck out for the shore, though death alone could wait him there.

There flashed upon his mind at that dread moment, thoughts of her he was never to see again ; thoughts of all his past life—a blameless one certainly ; of his friends ; his young hopes and aspirations all ended together ; of the miserable death so close at hand now, and closing his eyes in a species of despair, when a ball or junk of iron struck him full upon the helmet, half-stunned he sunk, and the water closed over his head. There was a bubbling with a sound of bells in his ears, and he remembered no more !

CHAPTER XLI.

DROWNED.

MEANWHILE the stirring game of war and adventure progressed among the stupendous mountains into which our troops were penetrating. A wing of the Albany Highlanders, another of Ghoorkas with two mountain-guns, were taken by their active and intrepid general as a flying column, to make a rush at the Shutargardan, and then halted in the forest of the Thousand Trees ; after which came tidings that he was unable to overtake the agile enemy, but had captured many of their cannon and returned to the Khoorum Fort, where we left Daljarroch feverish, though the cold was now intense, and in agony with a wound so dangerous, that Dr. Marrowbone made his blood run cold by hints about amputation under chloroform ; and now it was that a gracious message from her Majesty the Queen came to make the hearts of our soldiers glad.

Then we were told how they were pushing on from Ali Khel through the savage Manguar Pass, some seventeen miles beyond the Peiwar Khotal, and the column had its advanced and rear-guards harassed by those bands of marauders by whom the district was infested, particularly Mongols and Mirzan Khels under Abdoollah Khan and his brother Ferozoodeen Khan, a savage chief of a very fierce type. The former were terribly cut up by the fiery little Ghoorkas, of whom several were killed and wounded, and in an uphill rush after some of the Mirzan Khels, Cosmo Crawford received a wound, for which, though severe, he disdained to quit the field ; but marched with his arm slung in the scarf of a Khel he had cut down.

Then came news that the Ameer Shere Ali had fled to Turkestan, leaving Yakoob Khan at the head of affairs in Cabul. The 19th of December had now arrived ; but no news of Oliphant had come to the camp of the Albany High-

landers, and his existence seemed to have become quite a thing of the past.

While all these and many more events were occurring in that wild land, in which so many doubts are expressed if we should ever have displayed our colours, we shall borrow the vaunted power of Puck again, and look homeward.

The Earl of Abercairnie's household is at Abercairnie again.

It is December now—dark December—the month of the shortest day and the longest night, when the mist-like rain turned to ice on rock and tree, and the winding Forth and woody Teith were arrested in their downward course from the mountains ; when the half-starved fieldfares and robins creep into the naked hedges for warmth, and every house, however cosy within, has a wintry look without, with its rime-covered windows and icicles under the eaves ; when the lochs that remained unfrozen in the Lennox looked black through the snow, with the bordering pines and the cold grey sky mirrored deep down below ; when the sheep burrowed on the sheltered brae-sides, munching the frozen turnips half-hidden in the snow, and many a shy bird, seldom seen at other times, draws near to house and homestead in search of the food it fails to get elsewhere ; and when, if the dry frost holds good, the curling-rinks may be found crowded by persons of all classes, the laird, the minister, the provost, even nobles, all being hail-fellow-well-met with ploughman and artizans, in their enthusiasm with the hearty, healthy national game—though we are compelled to say, that in *his* locality my Lord Abercairnie had never patronised aught so vulgar and provincial as a game of curling during his whole august career.

He had returned with his household to Abercairnie because it was not fashionable to be 'in town' at that season. Hard, cold and repellent though he was, his tenantry always hailed his return with great warmth and satisfaction after an absence of months, during which time all their rents—of

which in all this hard winter he would not abate one jot—had been drafted to London, without their benefiting thereby, and, as Fielding says in ‘Joseph Andrews,’ ‘If the court would be severely missed in such a city as London, how much must the absence of a person of great fortune be felt in some little country community, for whose inhabitants such a family finds a constant employ and supply?’

The circle of friends which he had about him was small at present, and not very distinguished; the family rather avoided society just now, in consequence of ‘the cursed *malheur* of that fellow Daljarroch,’ as the earl phrased it, and until the matter was fully adjusted, Lady Augusta was still lingering in Edinburgh, a residence there being suited to her limited means and doubtful future; and if Abercairn was dull, Auriel congratulated herself on the absence of Sir John Lennell, though her cousin Sidney had once more come to play the part of privileged dangler, for which the earl was not sorry, as his presence might serve to spur on the baronet once more.

None that saw Auriel exquisitely dressed on every occasion, and looking so radiant, gay and agreeable to all, could have imagined that the girl had a secret to brood and con over.

Had her engagement to Charlie Oliphant been recognised and sanctioned by her father and family, instead of being a perilous secret, locked in her own breast; could she have corresponded with him openly, and looked forward to some reasonable time when that engagement would end, as others usually do, in a happy marriage, she could have borne with content his enforced absence in India; but now, they were separated to all appearance so hopelessly, that the consciousness thereof cost her many a pang and tear.

One of her great comforts was the memory of that farewell interview, by which she had soothed the pain of her father’s terrible affront upon Charlie—an interview that the earl, had he known of it, would have deemed most unseemly and never to be forgiven.

Affectionate though her nature, she had no longing for the confidence of Augusta, in the matter of Charlie's love for her and Lennell's most advantageous proposals. She saw that the great natural pride of Augusta, exasperated as it was by the result of her own marriage, would lead her to turn a deaf or angry ear to all she might tell her. Thus Auriel's heart was every way thrust back upon herself.

To those who watched her closely, she seemed at times actually to have aged a little, but it was since that day she had parted with Charlie in London; and still more would they have been struck with this, had they seen her unwatched, in the solitude of her own room. Constant alarm and anxiety for him, and the practice of self-communing, tempered in reality the brightness of her spirit, and shaded her fair young brow; thus, her outer bearing was all acting, for she had begun to find that, with Daljarroch's misfortune and her father's persistent yet quiet tyranny, life—even to a peer's daughter—was not all *couleur de rose*.

She had read, of course, of the arrival of the *Simla* at Bombay, and the almost instant departure of the various detachments, but particularly that of the Albany Highlanders, to the front.

To the front! she knew what that meant—to be face to face with the most hardy and savage of all the mountain races of India, and perhaps ere now, when the winter snows were falling on the hills of the Lennox, *he* might have fallen under a storm of rifle-bullets, or gashed by knives—she read of such dreadful things—the well-remembered features might be cold in death; the beautiful eyes, for such she deemed them, that had turned in love to hers, closed for ever, and the quiet, soft, and self-reliant voice for ever still.

But if prayer could avert such a fate, it surely would never happen to Charlie, for in the still hours of the night, and in the silence of her bed-chamber, and in her heart of hearts, the girl prayed for her soldier-lover that was so far away, and in doing so always, we fear, forgot herself.

With a sick heart she opened and scanned the daily papers for the Indian news, and when abroad in the carriage, or when riding, could never see without a thrill those startling posters inscribed in huge letters : ' Important news from Afghanistan ! —Great victory !—Terrible disaster !—awful slaughter !' and so forth. At the very name of Afghanistan she felt herself grow pale—and paler would she have become had she quite known *all* !

Her brother, Lord Ochertyre, a cheeky boy from Eton, with some of his companions, was home for the holidays, and to have a shot at the grouse and blackcock ; McCringer, the M.P., with whom her father had so many sympathies in common, was at Abercairnie, where the limited circle, to Auriel's annoyance, included Lord Drumsheugh, the harsh-voiced, toddy-drinking senator, coarse in visage, hands, and anecdote, with his delectable spouse, who excelled in what Basil Hall called ' the hideous *patois* of the modern Athens ;' and as if it had been part and parcel of the earl's system—as perhaps it was—to show off Sir John Lennell by contrast, she was dosed very much with the society of these northern worthies.

Why the haughty and exclusive earl gave such people house-room, it is difficult to say, unless for the reason given ; and that he found their utter want of Scottish nationality, and general admiration of all local things as they exist, congenial with his own disposition, while there ' booin,' *à la* Sir Pertinax, their extreme deference to all his opinions, no matter what they were, and their general air of flutter in his presence, flattered him.

So with Auriel the dull days passed on, till there came *one* which she never forgot.

A party were going covert-shooting, so that breakfast was laid in the morning-room earlier than usual ; but none had appeared thereat as yet save Auriel, the earl, and her brother, little Lord Ochertyre. Snow covered the country ; the view from the windows was bleak and depressing ; the

last leaves were fluttering down noiselessly from the beeches and elms, which stood bare and gaunt against a dull grey sky, and to Auriel's eye all nature seemed gloomy and listless.

Her brother, a handsome young lad, was accurately attired in a heather-coloured shooting-kilt and jacket, with brown leather-gaiters over his hose, and had in his hand a gun, finely mounted with silver.

'You should leave that in the hall or the gun-room, Ronald,' said the earl.

'I want to show my present to Aurie,' said the lad.

'Ah, yes,' said the earl approvingly, and looked round inquiringly for the morning paper.

'Only look at my new gun, Aurie; isn't it a jewel?'

'Perhaps; how should I know about it?' asked his sister, smiling.

'Well, it should interest you,' said Ochtertyre, in a tone of retort.

'Why?'

'I mean if all papa says is true.'

'I should say all that papa says, is always true,' said Auriel, laughing now: 'but about what?'

'You and he who gave it to me; it is a central fire, don't you see?'

'Gave it to you?' said Auriel, faintly.

'Yes; Sir John Lennell—a jolly old cock, Aurie, and so spoony on you.'

'This is odious slang, Ronald! Where on earth did you pick up such words?'

'Eton, sister of mine; that's the place. I wish you'd marry him, and then you would see how I should knock over his rocketers at Lennell. You are fond of him, are you not?'

'Silence, Ronald; I do not like jests of this kind, and take away the gun at once!' said Auriel, with some asperity.

'Why speak to the boy so sharply?' asked the earl, looking up from the *The Field*, as Ronald withdrew with his gun.

'You know, papa, how detestable some kind of jesting is to me!'

'Auriel,' said the earl severely, as he eyed her through his gold glasses, 'I could almost imagine that you cherished an ill-placed attachment.'

'So you have long given me reason to suppose, papa,' she replied, restraining her tears.

'I never knew a reasonable or a sensible mind but was able to subdue or forget such a misfortune.'

This was nearly the first time that the earl had referred pointedly to the scene in Mayfair.

'My heart is turned to stone, papa,' said Auriel, bitterly.

'Sir John Lennell covets it, my darling, all stony though it be; this I may say, since his name has been so abruptly referred to by your brother.'

'Oh, papa! but——'

'But what?' asked the earl, impatiently.

'I cannot, and never will love Sir John—good and noble as he is—as a husband ought to be loved.'

'Stuff! the very cant of plays and novels! Your mamma and I got on very well without the kind of love you mean.'

'Hush, papa! you may be heard.'

'Think of your position and mine—ours, Auriel—since that swindler——'

'Oh, papa—poor Duncan!'

'Think of the struggle I may yet have to make—if Augusta's settlements are nowhere——'

'I have thought, papa.'

'Then it is your duty to become Lady Auriel Lennell when asked. And where *are* the morning papers?' said the earl, abruptly changing the subject, as Sidney St. John entered the room, and Auriel wearily seated herself before the breakfast equipage.

'I left them in the smoking-room, uncle,' said Sidney, in whose face a close observer might have observed a startled expression, as he added, 'but there is no news this morning.'

‘But I say there *is!*’ cried little Ochtertyre, rushing in with the *Scotsman* in his hand. ‘Oh, I say, papa!—Aurie—here is something about Gussy’s husband, Daljarroch! Shouldn’t I too like to have been there, to have had a shy at the Afghan beggars!’

‘What is it?’ asked the earl, coldly.

‘By telegram, “Capture of the Peiwar Pass,”’ said the boy, reading while his face glowed with excitement; ‘“victory by General Roberts; heavy loss of the enemy. The Khoorum division attacked and carried the pass, capturing eighteen guns, and completely putting the Ameer’s army to headlong flight. The position was enormously strong, and the enemy worked their guns to the last. The 5th Ghoorkas and”—hurrah, papa!—“the Albany Highlanders were excelling in their bravery. Lieutenant Chieslie, of the latter corps, was killed.” Some other names followed, and then there came this paragraph, “Captain Daljarroch engaged no less than five Afghans, and saved the life of Lieutenant Crawford, but was severely wounded, and sent with the others to the Khoorum Fort in charge of Lieutenant Charles Edward Oliphant of the Highlanders, who was unfortunately drowned in the Khoorum when returning.”’

A silence followed, for Auriel felt that the eyes of Sidney and her father were upon her; but she shrunk most from the former.

Dreadful was the shock of this announcement, of which there was no reason to doubt the terrible truth. She felt as if turned to stone; she could command her tears, but not the mortal pallor that overspread her face, or the tremor of her poor little hands as they wandered fatuously among the teacups, when their visitors came in succession to take their places at that, to her, most terrible breakfast-table.

A dim consciousness possessed her, that it was to save her this shock yet awhile, that Sidney had removed all the morning papers.

Now what actual sentiment animated Sidney—who could not be insensible of his cousin's beauty—it is impossible to say, unless an English spirit of opposition to his father's curious will, with a knowledge that Auriel did not care for him, and that she had, as he knew, a decided *tendresse*—he deemed it nothing more—for Charlie Oliphant.

Anyway, he felt—with all his fashionable indifference, *insouciance*, and carelessness of character—a great pity for the girl who had such a shock in store for her ; but his good intentions were marred by the impetuosity of little Ochtertyre, who read the hasty telegram again and again with great glee, ignorant that every time the name of Oliphant was mentioned, it went like a knife to his sister's heart.

She heard Lord Drumsheugh, Mr. McCringer, and others, uttering their commonplace condolences to the earl on the wound of his son-in-law, and praises of his bravery; but no one spoke of poor Charlie Oliphant.

Her father's voice went on and on in her ears, but what he said she knew not ; the butler who officiated at the side-table dispensing ham, and fowl, and grouse-pie, more than once addressed her, but she heard him not. The great room seemed to be swimming round her : she saw no longer the magnificent equipage before her ; the velvety carpet, the mirrors, pictures, glass-shades, and statuettes, the snow-covered lawn without, all passed away ; and there came before her, as in a dream, the meetings in the garden, in the library, at the Fairy Rock, on that last day in London, and then—a pale drowned corpse whirling in the eddies of the Afghan river !

The earl, her father, had in his youth worn the tartan and the uniform of the regiment ; yet no thoughts of *esprit de corps*, or of pity for the lad who had perished in the execution of his duty, occurred to him. A bramble had been apparently removed from his noble path, and that was all.

Daljarroch might die of his wound, and Augusta be freed—a double stroke of luck would thus have been achieved in

the capture of the Peiwar Pass ; but to his unamiable mind this thought was always recurring :

‘ I am deuced glad that Highland fellow is out of the way—done for—disposed of for ever ! Like Don Juan, “ sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time.” ’

The morning meal seemed as if it would never be over ; and yet Auriel felt that strange propensity we all feel in times of high excitement to notice trifles, and found herself persistently studying the patterns of the Wedgewood ware.

At last the sportsmen, all more or less noisy, hearty and full of cheery laughter, went off to the coverts, and the girl thanked heaven that she was left alone.

The whole tide of her great grief flowed on, and absorbed her very soul ; yet, mechanically, she read in the paper the fatal tidings once, and once only.

‘ Drowned in the Khoorum when returning ’—*drowned!* There was no mistaking the matter, the name, or the regiment, or the genuineness of the official report. Her lips were bloodless, her eyes stony, and she shuddered as she thought of how her father viewed this tragedy in her life. She pushed her golden hair back from her snowy temples ; she stared wildly at vacancy ; she had no heart to lean on, no voice to comfort her ! She was utterly alone in her great trouble and grief, and she seemed to hear the heedless tones of Ronald as he read the sentence of death upon her poor Charlie—her unburied lover.

There seemed no past, no present, no future now ; all was chaos to Auriel !

She rushed to her room, flung herself upon the bed, and found some relief in a passion of tears ; but how terrible was that gloomy time—the first of her great grief—to the crushed young heart ! Hour after hour she lay there—a prey to terrible thoughts, and ever and anon murmuring to herself, ‘ Oh, Charlie ! would that I too were dead ! ’ But ‘ she did not know—it is learned only by experience—that young hearts are as strong to endure as to suffer ; for death is such

a privilege that it is seldom, but when we can cheerfully live, that the blessed angel kisses the brow grown serene amid tempests.'

When the shooting-party returned she had to rouse herself from her sorrows ; but the effort was too much for her, and complaining of illness, she secluded herself for two or three days in her room ; yet no physician was sent for, as the earl knew that time alone could cure her.

* * * * *

Days and weeks passed, and the exigencies of society required that she should have a part in it, however toilsome and repugnant they proved. Custom is a tyrant, and it is fortunate for us that the habits of everyday life are so inexorably exacting, for no matter who lives or dies, comes or departs, or goes to the wall, 'the clocks go round and the dinner arrives,' says a clever writer, whose long account, alas ! is closed ; 'and whatever may be the sorrow brooded over in the inner life, we dress for dinner when the time comes, and look in the glass and dry our eyes, and have a glass of sherry after our soup, and the tyrant Custom and the motley jester Society bid us sit between them ; and this woos from us a vapid smile, and that lays his iron hand upon our brow and dares us to stir, and we are all the better for the hypocrisy and the restraint.'

CHAPTER XLII.

A PRISONER.

THE waters of the Koorum certainly did close over the head of Charlie Oliphant ; but he was not fated to perish, for all that, otherwise our narrative might—so far as he is concerned—have closed with the preceding chapter.

Half-choking he rose to the surface, and though partially stunned by the iron junk, or slug, that had struck his helmet,

so strong is the instinct of self-preservation, that, like one in a dream, he made a few strokes towards the bank of the stream, and clutching some of the jungly bushes that grew in wild luxuriance over the water, supported himself for about a minute ; but he had scarcely begun to respire freely, when there was a furious crashing sound among the underwood ; then came a vision of dark and savage faces, of floating garments, of gleaming eyes and glittering knives. Strong hands were laid upon him ; he was roughly dragged up the bank, and found himself face to face with his quondam guide—the rider of the yaboo—whom he had cut down and unhorsed but a few hours before.

Yells resounded in his ears ; his sword was rent from his side, and he was dragged further up the bank, unable to speak, and anticipating a cruel mutilation and instant slaughter ; or, if spared, only to be sold as a slave to the Usbeg Tartars.

He seemed to live an eternity of agonising thought in the vibration of a pendulum, but was not left long in doubt, for the firing and the noise had roused the leader of these Mirzan Khels, who came from his nest among the rocks, and Charlie, to his bewilderment, found himself before their dreaded chief—Abdoollah Khan—whilom his valet and khitmutgar, who held up his hands, exclaiming :

‘*Ackbar, sahib ! yih jadoo hy !* (Wonderful, sir ! this is magic !) Salaam, Oliphant Sahib !’

‘Salaam to you, Abdoollah Khan,’ replied Charlie, while his captors in some surprise began to relax their fierce hold.

The ex-guide, whose treachery had so nearly been so fatal to Charlie, and who proved to be no other than Ferozoodeen Khan, the brother of Abdoollah, now stood with his right hand on the grasp of his khundjar, eyeing the latter and their prisoner with perplexity and ferocity.

‘You wish to spare him ?’ he asked, with astonishment.

‘Yes,’ replied Abdoollah.

‘And why ? Has a madness come upon you ?’

'No ; but this is the sahib of whom I told you, who was kind to me in other lands—yea, upon the sea too. I have eaten his bread and his salt, and in my tent he shall be as my brother.'

'By the five keys of knowledge, this bewilders me !' exclaimed Ferozoodeen, to whom gratitude was perhaps as little known as mercy. 'Well, I have *not* eaten his bread and salt, so let the Feringhee look to himself !' Then turning to Charlie, who stood drooping and dripping before him, he said, with unutterable ferocity of eye and manner : 'But for my brother, I had ridden home with your head at my saddle trussed up in my boosa bag.'

This was the forage or nose-bag of his yaboo ; and it was impossible for Charlie not to speculate upon what must inevitably have been his fate in such terrible hands, had Abdoollah Khan not been there.

'Enough of this, Ferozoodeen,' said the latter, patting his brother on the shoulder. '*La ilaha illa 'llaho !*' he added, the inevitable phrase, 'There is no god but God,' which was seldom out of his mouth ; indeed, it preceded or followed everything else he said, so that we need not repeat it. But we have elsewhere referred to the incessant use of holy names and pious quotations by the Afghans in their daily intercourse with each other.

'I am grateful to you, sahib, for having brought me with you even beyond the Indus,' said Abdoollah ; 'but for you I might never have seen the peaks of the Safid Koh again. I shall, please God, requite it to you.'

'By sending me back to my people, Abdoollah?' asked Charlie, anxiously.

'Not yet awhile,' replied Abdoollah, evasively ; 'I shall make no promises.'

'How far distant is our camp?'

'Four *coss*.'

'Only eight miles ! For the good deeds I have done you, Abdoollah, let me depart at once.'

But the Afghan shook his head.

‘Why?’

‘That is my will and secret.’

Charlie now begged that his sword—the blade of which had been used by his father and grandfather—might be restored to him. Abdoollah, who had burnished it many a time and oft, desired it to be returned; but Ferozoodeen freely confiscated his revolver, pistol, and his handsome Highland dirk with its three cairngorms, which he evidently conceived to be stones of great value; and the prisoner was distinctly warned that if he made the slightest effort to escape he would be killed without mercy; so Charlie Oliphant found there was nothing for it now but patience and endurance.

His sodden attire was partially replaced by a sheepskin coat; and after a hasty repast of kabobs of beef or mutton—Charlie could scarcely tell which—broiled nearly black on an old ramrod, and seasoned, it would seem, with gunpowder in lieu of salt or pepper, some bread and dried grapes, with a draught of red Derehnur wine from Abdoollah’s large leather bottle, the whole party set off, some on yaboos, and some on foot, conveying with them their prisoner, he knew not whither, or for what purpose, but eventually it proved, to place him in the khan’s fort among the mountains.

His captors were swarthy, strongly-built, and lithely-limbed men, dark-bearded, with long greasy curls flowing from under their turbans or loongees, and with a general aspect not conducive to closer acquaintance than was necessary.

All were armed with a profusion of weapons, and carried shields of buffalo-hide, bossed with brass, and though small, forming a swift and efficient defence on the dexter arm of a quick-eyed Afghan, against a khundjar-thrust or tulwar-slash. Nearly every one of these men bore marks of sword or bullet wounds, which rather added to the native grimness of their dark and saturnine visages.

The river-bank, the low-lying country with its rice and

paddy-fields, and their innumerable water-cuts, courses, and irrigation channels, were left behind, and the paths pursued now lay among apparently inaccessible mountain ranges ; but high over all, from any direction, the majestic line of the Safid Koh was always visible, its peaks covered with snow, and its sides seamed with ghastly ravines.

Once, between an opening in the hills, Charlie could see afar off the white tents of the British camp shining in the afternoon sun—'the camp of the accursed English—the race of Cain !' as Ferozoodeen muttered through his set teeth ; but Oliphant was not permitted to look at it long, as the path soon came to a *kotal*, which means the dip in a range of hills over which a road runs, and then he saw the tents no more.

For miles upon miles now their course lay over an arid and sandy tract, bounded by barren and jagged peaks, where no living thing was to be seen but deer or birds, blue pigeons and titlarks, or here and there a giant raven flapping his dusky wings over the lonely waste.

How far they proceeded Charlie knew not ; but after the toil of the preceding night, his immersion in the Khoorum, the blow he had received on the head, and all the excitement he had undergone, he felt that he must have dropped by the wayside, had not Abdoollah mercifully ordered one of his men to dismount, and given him the use of his stout little Cabulee pony ; and the last rays of the sun, as he set behind the mountains, showed him the dark mass of the fort—a huge quadrangular edifice having a round tower at each angle—on the shoulder of a hill about a mile distant.

Charlie Oliphant looked at it wistfully, and felt, as if by anticipation, that more peril than rest or pleasure awaited him within the sombre grey walls ; yet, for the present, he hailed the resting-place, he was so weary and worn.

CHAPTER XLIII.

ABDOOLLAH'S HOUSEHOLD.

WHEN he awoke next morning, after a deep and profound sleep—the very slumber of long and enforced weariness and hardship—his head was still suffering from the effect of the contusion, and he had some difficulty for a little time in remembering all that had happened during the past few days, and that he was now a prisoner in the Afghan fort of Abdoollah Khan.

His charpoy, or bed, was not an uncomfortable one for a soldier accustomed to hardships and the bare earth, as he had been at times ; it was made up of soft skins, with a stuffed cushion for a pillow.

'Blessed be the man who invented this same sleep !' says Sancho. 'Ditto say I,' thought Charlie, turning on his pillow. 'I wish I could sleep again and court forgetfulness, or dream of hope for the present and happiness to come.'

But though the hour was early (he had not his watch, which was now in the cummerbund of some appreciative Afghan), further sleep was impossible in the novelty of his situation, and amid the unwonted sounds he heard from time to time—men shouting to each other, or conversing in the Afghani or Pushti tongue—a rough, manly, and not unpleasing language to an ear accustomed to Oriental dialects ; and there were the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep, for, like an old Scottish Border peel or fortified grange in time of war, the fort of Abdoollah was full of his live-stock, the chief wealth of his people, and he came betimes to look after the wants of his unwilling guest.

The ground-floor of the quadrangular fort, which was of great extent, was devoted chiefly to horses and cattle. The rooms occupied by the khan, his wives and children, were on the upper floor, all clean and airy, and lighted from the courtyard. External openings, save loopholes for musketry, there

were none. The furniture was scanty, as Charlie afterwards discovered ; skins and carpets to repose on, and divans to sit on, there were plenty ; and the khan's armed followers, to the number of some hundred, stowed themselves away in the four flanking towers, which were of great height and strength, and commanded an extensive view of the valley and stream that descended towards the Khoorum, and on the west by the lofty Jadran mountains, that rise between the Khost Valley and Ghuzni, which latter lies some forty miles distant from their ridges.

But all this he discovered afterwards.

Abdoollah's costume was now changed for the better : he wore a pair of wide pantaloons of dark-blue cotton ; a camise, or kind of blouse with wide sleeves, reaching to the knee ; a loongee of gay-coloured cloth, turned up by black silk, and half-boots of brown leather, laced close to the limb ; and in his shawl-girdle were three handsome daggers of different size ; and thereat, too, dangled a large wooden rosary of ninety-nine beads, being one for each attribute of the Deity.

'Salaam, sahib,' said he, as he bade his former master good-morning, just as he had been wont to do on board the *Simla* at Bombay, and during their long and devious journey by rail up-country ; and he was accompanied by a servant, who bore on a tray a breakfast for Charlie, composed of boiled chicken, a *cuddoo* curry and rice (*i.e.*, served in a gourd), flour-cakes or chupattees, half-dried grapes, and what proved more grateful than all, some hot steaming tea, and pipes for tobacco.

Of his unpleasant neighbour, Ferozoodeen, Charlie saw nothing ; that worthy's abode was on the other side of the fort, where he was wont—when not working mischief among the hills—to seclude himself with his children and the females of his family.

'I thank you for all your kindness and protection, Khan Sahib,' said Charlie, as he took some of the chicken, using his fingers, as forks were unknown in the *ménage* of the

Khel Fort—though his appetite was gone, the simple tea proved most acceptable; ‘but I trust you will soon let me depart, for two reasons.’

‘And these are, sahib?’ asked Abdoollah, while he stuck one hand in his girdle, and ran the fingers of the other through his voluminous black beard.

‘I must not encroach upon your hospitality——’ Charlie began doubtfully.

‘In that I do but obey the Koran, for does not the fourth chapter inculcate that we should “show kindness unto parents and relations and orphans, and the poor, and also your neighbour who is a stranger, and the *traveller* and the *captive* whom your right hand shall possess?”’

Charlie sighed with impatience.

‘And the other reason?’ asked Abdoollah, complacently toying with his beard, and eyeing him keenly.

‘Our troops may move, and thus I may fail to find them.’

‘May their faces be confounded as those of the unbelievers were at the battle of Bedr!’ said Abdoollah angrily, quoting the Koran. ‘But, for the matter of that, they have moved, I believe.’

‘Where?’

‘I know not; but here you are my prisoner now, sahib, and here you shall remain so long as I choose,’ said the khan, gravely, yet not unkindly. ‘Had I not been at the Khoorum yesterday, how would it have fared with you in the hands of Ferozodeen?’

‘Most true!’ said Oliphant.

He felt, moreover, even while speaking of liberty, that it would be nearly useless if granted to him then, as he was neither able to travel nor defend himself if attacked.

‘Moreover, rumour says that the Khyberees, who hold the upper regions of the Safid Koh, have descended like a hundred thousand reapers with swords of steel to a harvest of death, and have destroyed all your wounded in the Khoorum Fort.’

The eyes of the Afghan gleamed redly as he spoke ; and though Charlie could not but smile at his inflation of speech, he felt a sickness of heart at the conviction that there might be truth in the rumour, for the Khyberees are among the most powerful, rapacious and treacherous of all the Afghan clans, and he thought of what would be the fate of poor Daljarroch and others in such butcherly hands !

‘ If this be true,’ added Abdoollah, seeing the effect of his speech in his listener’s face, ‘ even a Lohani, who will face anything, or go anywhere, could not hope to reach the Feringhee camp, to say nothing about the fangs of the Ghoule Biaban !’

The Lohanis are a pastoral tribe, who are soldiers as well as itinerant traffickers, and are wont to face and grapple with obstacles that even all other Afghans shrink from, and he used the simile to impress his prisoner the more, as to the futility of attempting a successful escape.

‘ Be of good cheer for the present,’ said Abdoollah, ‘ and come with me—my family are anxious to see you.’

We may here explain to the reader, that the Afghans, with all their ferocity, are a sociable and even romantic race, and that the intercourse between the sexes is with them on a far more generous and civilised footing than among other tribes who adhere to the degrading creed of Mahomet.

The home of an Afghan deserves to be deemed one in reality, for he shares the hours of leisure pleasantly with his wives and their little ones ; but if a guest, not a European, arrives at his abode, he will conduct him without scruple into the circle of his family.

Charlie was a European—a Feringhee—one of the race of Cain—a believer in false idols and so forth ; but the past relations in which they had stood to each other, and the real debt of gratitude which Abdoollah owed the former, led to a special exception in his favour ; and thus it was, that while the rooms were beginning to whirl round him with a giddiness the forerunner of fever, he found himself conducted

into what is named 'the interior' of an inner portion of a Moslem household, and received by the two wives of Abdoollah, who, each seated on a divan and carpet, fan in hand, gazed at him in a species of helpless wonder and curiosity.

To one, who was a mother, her little children clung with alarm and horror in their black eyes; the other, who was childless, sat alone, and near her lay the saringa or Afghan guitar, on which she had been recently playing.

Both were evidently astonished at an event so unusual as a visit from a European, and at the sudden and unwonted trust of their husband; and in this trust, which certainly Charlie Oliphant did not seek, originated in time to come his worst perils and greatest troubles.

While Abdoollah Khan was recurring to much that he had no doubt related to them before—his rescue from the boat by the *Simla*, and how since that day of exceeding misery, till he took to flight and left him near the Indus, Oliphant Sahib had ever been so considerate of him, so studious and generously attractive that he should have full freedom in every way, with regard to his food, prayers, and ablutions as a Mahometan, and so forth—he, on whom he was paying so many encomiums, had an ample opportunity of closely observing the two Afghan ladies.

Both were evidently women of a western tribe, as their complexions were remarkably fair, their faces well shaped, but their hair and eyes very black indeed. They wore camises, coloured or brocaded with silk, with loose trousers of light stuff, and caps of yellow silk embroidered with gold, barely touching the forehead or the ears, with their veils, which they now lowered. Their hair was braided at the back of the head, and intertwined with strings of old Venetian sequins and chains of gold.

Nynee, the elder, was the mother of the three children who nestled on her carpet beside her. Myrah, the younger, had none; but she possessed more beauty than Nynee, who, sooth to say, had perhaps none at all. But she was the first

to hasten and fill and light her husband's long pipe, and to place beside him his water-bottle, for which he barely accorded her thanks ; while the other asked, in a low voice, with reference to their visitor :

' Does he understand our language ?'

' No.'

' I should like to teach him,' said she, with a coquettish little smile, but aside to Nynee. ' You attacked a kafila in the Durwazi Pass, it seems ?'

' Yes ; but cut off only one camel with its load. I have presents for you both, however,' replied Abdoollah, producing a bundle, which the ladies proceeded, with a haste inspired by curiosity and acquisitiveness, to unroll. To their profound thanks he uttered not a word, but smoked steadily on, as if to glance at them was condescension enough, their homage being his right.

For both he had China silks and Dacca muslins ; for Myrah was reserved, in addition, a set of beautiful Delhi *champac* ornaments, such as only the jewellers there in Chandney Chouk can produce. The eyes of both women sparkled at the sight of the ear-rings, brooch, and bracelets ; but there was the fiery and the deeper gleam of a not unnatural jealousy in those of Nynee the ill-favoured, at a special preference which too probably was not manifested for the first time. Even her veil failed to conceal the expression of her face ; and it seemed to Charlie, silent as yet, but observant, that if a glance could kill, the career of the younger and more favoured wife must have ended there and then.

Myrah at once put on her new ornaments and surveyed herself in a hand-mirror, drawing her veil once or twice slightly on one side, permitting the visitor to see on each occasion that she had a very clearly-cut profile, a pale, slightly olive complexion, lips that pouted like those of an Egyptian, and a certain amount of colour in the cheek that gave greater brilliance to her eyes, and at such a time, flushed as she was with vanity and pleasure, she looked picturesquely

pretty ; while Abdoollah, who seemed to have eyes for her only, reclined back in his divan and looked approvingly on, smoking his long chibouque the while.

Nynee sat silent, with a hardness in the expression of her mouth and an angry glitter in her eyes, for these people were too untutored to conceal their emotions completely. Charlie Oliphant felt the situation an uncomfortable one, but it was one that Abdoollah was evidently well used to ; and if he was somewhat indifferent to poor Nynee now, he seemed fond of their children, with whom he toyed and played marbles, a game for which the Afghans have the greatest relish, even when their hair has become white as snow.

He now commanded Myrah to sing, but she hesitated ; on which he at once raised his voice authoritatively, and quoted the fourth chapter of the inevitable Koran, concerning wifely obedience. So taking her saringa, the native guitar, she tinkled away to a sweet, though somewhat monotonous ditty, the subject of which—for he heard it often after—Charlie learned to be a love-passage between the chieftain of one tribe and the wife of the chief of another, leading to fierce war—a favourite subject in these regions, and particularly in the songs of Khutal Khan, a chief of the Khutucks, who was renowned alike in poetry and in arms, and whose songs are in great favour to the present day in Afghanistan.

But long ere her song ended, the light had left Charlie's eyes ; he heard her voice and the wiry tinkle of the saringa, but her figure, if seen by him at intervals, seemed blurred and indistinct, and he felt as one in a dream or a drowse.

All he had undergone of late was not without its effect on his system, hardy and a mountaineer though he was ; and as he sank back, overcome by fever, consequent to exposure to night dews and immersion in the river, he heard Abdoollah exclaim in alarm :

' *Suli Allah ullai u sul'm !** He is dying ! So be it, unbeliever though he is.'

* 'Peace and the blessing of God be on him !'

He was borne away to his charpoy of skins, and remembered no more for many days, during which Myrah was his chief nurse, for Abdoollah, who undertook that office, and who alone knew his language, had many duties to draw him elsewhere.

The jealous Nynee never went near his gloomy sick-chamber, though she watched near it, at times, and—waited too!

CHAPTER XLIV.

MYRAH.

OF Ferozoodeen Khan, Oliphant saw and heard nothing as yet. Whether he was out on the mountains cutting off British stragglers, or secluded in his own quarter of the fort, the patient never considered, or perhaps he was oblivious of all about him; but if Ferozoodeen Khan thought his brother mad for sparing his prisoner when dragged out of the Khoorum river, he deemed him doubly so now for making the unbeliever an inmate of his own household, and supposed that his ideas must, in some way, have been warped during his sojourn among the Feringhees.

'May they never pass the infernal bridge of Poulsherro!' he added, grinding his teeth.

So at the head of his mounted Khels, the then state of affairs in Afghanistan, especially in his quarter thereof, found Ferozoodeen and his elder brother plenty of work to do.

There were kafilas and convoys to watch, harass, and cut off if possible; stragglers, sick and wounded, to destroy; telegraph-wires, though they scarcely understood the use thereof, to slash through with the stroke of a tulwar; and to take pot-shots at any passing horseman on the chance of his having mails or despatches; for hill-men have nothing to do but polish their weapons and work mischief.

Their father Amenoolah Khan—a name detestable in Afghan and Anglo-Indian history for his treachery in 1840—had done many savage and bloody acts when Elphinstone's army was destroyed in the Khyber Passes. He it was who, by order of Ackbar Khan, hung with his own hands the head of the murdered Resident in a boosa-bag in the great bazaar of Cabul, and excelled all others in ferocity at the final slaughter of the 44th Regiment on the fatal Hill of Gundamuck ; and his sons now longed to emulate the deeds they had often heard him relate with exultation, when seated on his carpet, pipe in hand, in the old fort.

Forgotten by them at times, in the excitement of their multifarious plans and occupations, Charlie lay there day after day, on a not very luxurious couch, eating little or nothing, but thirstily drinking sherbet, milk, and tea from the hands of Myrah, or another attendant—a little Abyssinian slave maiden, for slavery exists largely in Afghanistan. The patient scarcely slept, and was generally glad when he did not, as painful and fantastic visions haunted him always.

By order of Abdoollah, pious invocations from the Koran for the recovery of the sick were written on slips of paper, from which the lines were washed with water given to Charlie to drink ; and the prescriber believed that it was in virtue of these, and not in that of his native constitution and his youth, that recovery set slowly but steadily in.

Then Charlie Oliphant began to suffer from extreme depression of spirit, as he was kept as ignorant of what was being done in the world without as the frog in the block of marble ; and yet a great and terrible game was being played around him, among the very hills which look down on that guarded fort.

Meanwhile, as novelty and shyness wore away, nothing could exceed the care of Charlie's two nurses, of Myrah especially ; preserves of those oranges, citrons, and grapes, which grow in such profusion between Cabul and Ghuzni, were selected for him, with the golden-coloured wine of Lum-

ganat, cooled with ice from crevices in the rocks where the rays of the sun never fell ; and she sprinkled cool essences from the roses of Gulistan on his temples and pillow, and fanned him with her fan of feathers (when no one was by), and perfumed the whole apartment with odorous sprinklings from a wonderfully carved flask, that was not gold, but looked extremely like it.

Often, all unknown to Charlie and others, the woman watched him when asleep—undefined sensations, a vague yet pleasing anxiety, an inexplicable charm pervading her heart, which palpitated as she noticed how smooth and fair his forehead was, his neck and chest half bare, and displaying a whiteness she had never seen before ; and his whole face and form as he slept looking, in her eyes, beautiful as those of the Roman Antinous—a smile at times upon his lips, and then an expression of pain and sorrow.

He had a secret. What was it ? How many wives might he be sorrowing for in that country vaguely known to her as Feringhistan ?

It might not have proved pleasant to all concerned had she been surprised in some of these watches by Abdoollah, or even by Ferozoodeen Khan.

Once Charlie lay, not asleep, but lost in thought, when he suddenly became conscious of being under the fixed gaze of some one—even those in slumber are said sometimes to be so. He looked up and met the eyes of Myrah, who coloured deeply ; and at that moment most picturesque she looked, with all the golden sequins glittering amid the dusky coils of her blue-black hair—if we may use the term—as she stood in the blaze of warm sunshine that streamed through a draped window behind her, while one very pretty, if not perfectly white, hand held aside the gathered veil.

She always wore the *champac* ornaments—so called from the flower whose petal they resemble—the last gift of her husband ; but whether as a species of spell to protect her against herself, or to enhance her natural attractions in the

eyes of the Feringhee, it is difficult to say; most probably the latter.

At least we rather fear that Nynee thought so.

Charlie feebly apologised for the great trouble he gave her, and uttered some thanks for her unremitting kindness.

He had done so many times before; but on this occasion she placed her hand upon his lips, as if to close them. On doing this, what else could Charlie do but press it to them? an act of reverence which even Abdoollah had never condescended to pay her, as he was too devout a Mussulman to view woman as ought else than a very inferior kind of animal.

To Charlie's eye, the only charm in his present existence was to see her gliding about, noiselessly in all she did, her brocaded slippers producing no sound, her silk trousers or camise never rustling.

When thanking Abdoollah for all her attention, the Afghan would wave the mouth-piece of his hookah, and say coldly :

'What would you have, sahib? God is great! He created women for the amusement of the true believer, but to reverence him in all things, and every way to occupy a subordinate position in this world, while having no portion in the next. "Men," saith the Koran, "shall have the pre-eminence above women, because of those advantages wherein God hath caused the one of them to excel the other;" and is it not so?'

'Oh no, khan!' exclaimed Oliphant, endeavouring to make himself understood in a somewhat polyglot fashion; 'we consider woman as made to be man's reasonable companion, not the slave of his whims or passion. To win his heart; to be the partner of his toil in life; to soothe him by her tenderness; and recompense his care by her endearments. She is the supreme mistress of his household, and as such is treated with love, respect, and devotion by all—by none more than her husband!'

Abdoollah Khan, who had the usual Indian vague and

distorted ideas of English society, from what he had seen when coming up-country with Charlie, and which he had of course utterly misjudged, glanced disdainfully, even angrily at him, and said :

'Ye are but unbelievers—unbelievers who worship devils, and as the twenty-seventh chapter of the Koran tells us, shall be struck with disappointment, and be the greatest losers in the world to come.'

Oliphant, though full of enthusiasm with his subject, had no desire for polemics with his host ; he was thinking only of the position of the Christian woman—perhaps too of Auriel—and he met the quiet approving eyes of Myrah, though she but half comprehended what he had said.

Abdoollah liked Charlie, in a manner of way, because he was used to him ; but the bearing of Spurrier Clank and Mrs. de Tomkyns Browne in the *Simla*, and of other ladies whom he had seen riding, driving, gambling, flirting (though he knew not what *that* meant) with the white sahibs, had not enhanced his respect for the women of Feringhistan.

Charlie was apt at languages ; Greek he had never learned, and the little he had acquired of Latin was forgotten ; he had already a smattering of Hindostanee, and he now strove to pick up the Afghani colloquially, not a difficult thing to do from the lips of such a pretty monitress as Myrah, when he had the additional incentive that it might prove useful and aiding when a time for escape came, especially as he was able to quit his charpoy now.

Having no children like Nynee to occupy her attention, Myrah had many pets, and one rather curious one, in the form of a tame bat, which ate insects out of her hand, and while doing so, brought its wings before its mouth, hovering in the manner of birds of prey.

Abdoollah, seeing Oliphant's surprise, reverted at once to the third chapter of the inevitable Koran, where Mahomet boasted that he could make birds of clay and give them life by breathing thereon ; and then the Afghan told a curious

fabulous tradition, that once, when the Prophet of the Christians, then seven years of age, was playing with other little children in the streets, they fashioned figures of birds and beasts, and each preferring his own workmanship, he told them that he would fashion birds which would walk and hop, and eat and drink, and then become sparrows or other birds, while those fashioned by the Camel-driver of Mecca (according to Jallalodeen) became only bats.

Charlie's extreme politeness and great deference to the wives of his host—a general air and tone which were merely peculiar to a well-bred man, to whom every woman is a lady, but a peculiarity to which they were quite unaccustomed—pleased and delighted them; but more especially the younger, who was less preoccupied by regard for her spouse than Nynee, to whom he had been married before he saw Myrah, whom he had carried off during some tribal raid in the mountains westward of Bamian.

That the captive's remarks about women and their place in the world had not been forgotten by Myrah was apparent by her one day recurring to them, and asking him softly through her veil:

'Sahib, have you a wife in Feringhistan?'

'No.'

'No! how strange!'

'Why so?'

'When do you mean to marry?'

'On returning home, I hope.'

'Have your father and mother one awaiting you—growing up, perhaps?'

'My father and mother are dead—dead long since,' said Charlie, half smiling at her Oriental ideas of a matrimonial arrangement.

'Dead?'

'Yes.'

And as he spoke, he could recall in that strange and uncouth place his gallant father, who more than once had led

the Albany Highlanders through 'storm of shot and hedge of steel ;' and the face of his mother, so tender and so loving ; and his heart tightened as he thought of them both with the old pang, which was so keen, long, long ago as it seemed now—when a boy at school he wakened up and wept in silence and yearning, for the dear faces he could never see again, and the voices he never more should hear, and felt in his heart indeed, how 'mother is the name for God with little children.'

'They are dead,' said he, after a pause ; 'but I have a bride awaiting me, for all that,' he added, with a joyous little laugh.

'Have you seen her ? *Staferillah !*' ('God forbid !')

'Often.'

'How strange ; and before marriage too ! And—and you love her ?'

'Yes ; as my own soul.'

A dark cloud came over the low brow of the handsome Afghan ; and after a pause she said, while shaking her head, so that the sequins in her hair tinkled and glittered :

'You bride will await you in vain.'

'Why ?'

'Abdoollah will never permit you to return.'

Something naughty in English, expressive of anger and impatience, rose to Charlie's lips, but he merely asked again :

'Why ?'

'A Feringhee prisoner is seldom taken——'

'True ; your people kill all.'

'Yet, when taken, is valuable in many ways.'

'As a hostage ?'

'Or a slave.'

'A slave !'

'Yet a word from me might do much for you, sahib.'

'Then when will you say that word ?' asked Charlie, imploringly.

'Time will show,' said she, and in tripping away, she threw

back at him, under her half-withdrawn veil, one of those glances that might have been like a Parthian arrow, all the more fatal for being delivered over the shoulder ; but it fell pointless on him, yet he could not but remark that her step was elastic, and her free graceful gestures came of her perfect symmetry of form, and of a woman who *felt* herself to be handsome. But her parting words had filled him with new and undefined alarm, together with an intense anxiety to regain his strength and liberty.

The fort was closely watched and guarded he knew, while Abdoollah spent much of his time scouring among the hills at the head of a risallah of horse, and on one of these occasions he seized the dead body of a Durani of high rank when on its way to be buried at Candahar, and detained it till a handsome ransom was paid, on which occasion there was much mirth and revelry in the fort. For Candahar is in the eyes of the Duranis especially sacred, as it contains the bones of all their great men, and the Durani sirdars who die in distant lands are all brought thither to be laid in the tombs of their forefathers.

Round the lurid blaze of a fire lighted in the courtyard, the Khels held an ogie that night, when they whooped and danced like demons to the warlike strains of the *sernai*—a species of bagpipe—shouted, sung, and brandished aloft their tulwars like warriors from the lower world ; and Charlie, fearing that they might remember the fact of his existence among them, and perhaps set the authority of their khan at defiance, prudently extinguished the light in the *cherang*, or little Indian lamp that burned upon a kind of low table in his room.

But they were all too intent on devouring that triumph of Afghan cookery—a pillau, consisting of a lamb entire, its inside taken out, filled up with rice, raisins, plums, and spices, and roasted thus, with the wool on !

Ferocious though he was by race and habit, the many kindnesses that Abdoollah had received at the hands of

Charlie, while acting as his *khitmutgar*—much though in his soul he had loathed acting a part so menial, and to a Feringhee especially—were not forgotten now ; nor were the Afghan instincts and Mahometan precepts concerning hospitality and succour to a suppliant, though a foe.

The total deprivation of all books and all news—though penny dailies had long since been things of the past with him—were sorely felt by Charlie during his days of convalescence ; and also after a time, the lack of a cigar and a glass of claret or brandy pawnee, after his currie and rice ; but these were very minor evils when contrasted with present peril and doubt of what was to come.

From the windows overlooking the court, he could see, daily, yaboos laden with forage or spoil going to and fro, and savage-looking fellows clad in coarse camises, with sheep-skin mantles having pendent sleeves thrown over the shoulders, cleaning and oiling their *juzails*, and twisting fresh matches round the locks, or sharpening and polishing the small armoury of knives and deadly daggers they carried in their shawl-girdles, smoking the while, and laughing jollily, for the Afghans are the least taciturn of all Orientals ; and not unfrequently he saw them having combats of dogs and rams, cocks and quails.

He could not but feel an emotion of intense disgust, mingled with hostility, when by chance he saw Ferozodeen Khan. How could it be otherwise ? The latter had striven to delude, murder, and rob him ; had tracked him, and barbarously striven once more to take his life at the Khoorum, and would assuredly attempt it again on the first opportunity.

To see such a personage going about armed to the teeth, and to know that he was hourly under the same roof with him, was rather too much for Charlie's equanimity.

As yet nothing had transpired to alarm him seriously, and he thought only of waiting with patience for restored strength to achieve an escape if liberty was denied him, though more

than once Abdoollah had hinted that if flight were attempted, he would assuredly be overtaken and slain by Ferozooden Khan.

Abdoollah was not a person to anger, or with whom to seek to temporise ; but his present conduct and ultimate intentions were a source of deep anxiety and much speculation to his prisoner.

What object had he in detaining him? As a valuable prisoner, for whose life or liberty to compound perhaps, for certain favours to be done himself if our forces prevailed at Cabul. That he meant to spare his life and yet to keep him indefinitely seemed evident. Could he mean, after all, to sell him to the Usbeg Tartars—the fate which so nearly befel Lady Sale and her companions in misfortune some forty years before ! So day succeeded day, and he writhed in a species of mental torture in that lonely guarded fort among the mountains, while his comrades were pushing forward on their career of glory under Roberts.

We have said that the courteous manner of Charlie to herself had pleased Nynee ; yet withal, in her secret hate and jealousy of the more favoured wife, she would not have hesitated to sacrifice him, in the terrible game of ridding the fort of *her*.

She saw more in the manner and bearing of Myrah than the latter suspected ; and thus she watched warily, and waited her time.

Nynee had no animosity to Charlie personally—quite the reverse ; but times there were when she complacently thought of his death, if it would cost her hated rival a pang !

CHAPTER XLV.

WHAT MANY WATERS CANNOT QUENCH.

'BISMILLAH! May God transform the English into apes, as He did the Sabbath-breakers of Ailah!' was the shout of Ferozodeen Khan one morning in the court-yard, where a mighty bustle of men arming themselves, and the saddling of horses and yaboos took place, with the bracing of shields and the loading and slinging of juzails.

Charlie's heart beat like lightning. What had happened? Had our troops already penetrated to Cabul and hoisted the British standard again upon the Bala Hissar? If so, how long would they remain there after they had reached it? Or was the retreating army to be destroyed, as that of Elphinstone, when it was cut off to *one man!*

None of these things had happened; but Abdoollah was simply setting forth at the head of his people to cut off, if possible, some convoy, or a portion thereof, in its progress after the Khoorum column; and in such predatory expeditions they seldom failed to inflict mischief, by their audacity, cunning, and skill, their dexterity and lightning-like rapidity, in which they excelled even the Jadrauns, a race of ferocious goat-herds, who wander continually through the thick pine-forests, and have long been a source of terror to all travellers and caravans on the road from Cabul through Bungush, near the Peiwar Khotal Pass.

The horsemen of Abdoollah Khan were neither encumbered by tents nor baggage; each carried a few chupattees for his own subsistence, and some grain, or boosa (*i.e.*, chopped forage) in a net for his nag, and all were armed with at least a dozen of weapons of various kinds, and all departed in hurry and haste (leaving a guard of old men and youths to keep the fort and its prisoner), and all passed under the turban, or loongee, of Abdoollah, which was unwound and

stretched out for that purpose by Ferozoodeen and a moollah, a ceremony which they believed might secure them from wounds or death.

Save that they had matchlocks and pistols, in their other weapons, their manners and ideas, and most probably in dress, they were all as unchanged as their ancestors who fought under Mahmoud of Ghuzni, and who in the twelfth century established an empire that spread from the Tigris to the Ganges, a state of society, indeed, 'as old as the hills.'

Abdoollah blessed his children and kissed both his wives when he departed, Nynee once, but Myrah repeatedly. Perhaps the kiss he gave his horse's nose ere he mounted was quite as tender; but Nynee was intensely dissatisfied with her share of the osculation, as the expression of her face showed.

Her eyes were deeply set, and when excited there was a cruel glitter in them, while her thin lips closed tightly over her strong white teeth, giving her dark face a cast of firm resolve; and such an expression it wore just then, as her husband rode off with his clattering risallah, and the gates of the fort were closed and barricaded behind him, and the gingals that defended them were reloaded.

The residence of Charlie—as a Feringhee especially—was a startling event in the secluded lives of the two women in that sequestered fort among the desolate mountains; but more eventful to Myrah, as she was less occupied with ideas of her husband, and had no family to take up her attention.

They, but more especially she, were never tired of asking him about the women of Feringhistan—ideas of its whereabouts or by what tribe occupied, they had none—or of their dress, marriages, lovers, husbands; how many wives one might have; and great was their astonishment—a little contempt, too—to hear that a husband was limited to one. All this formed an endless source of conversation, and Myrah was never weary of questioning him.

The women of Feringhistan! Charlie laughed softly as

he thought of Auriel, a being of whom his listeners could have no more conception than if she had been a denizen of the moon.

'It is obvious,' says a writer, 'that when two people are at opposite ends of a line, and wish to meet at a given point, one must take the initiative, and move in the desired direction, if it be but an inch at a time ;' but, in the instance we have before us, the desire to move lay with Myrah alone, and, like a true woman of the East, she was not long in taking the initiative, though Charlie was slow to perceive it.

She always flushed up, looking so bright and so pleased when he spontaneously addressed her, that after a time he almost feared to do so ; and he often caught her eyes fixed on him, half wistfully and half coquettishly, when flirting two falcons of Abdoollah, which, in the Afghan fashion, they sometimes carried on their wrists. So Charlie knew not what to think ; yet when wandering in the garden attached to the fort, a garden in which he contrived to tell her she was the brightest flower, the compliment seemed to give her such delight that he was foolishly tempted to say many more such things to please her.

Unaware that there was any danger in all this, Charlie Oliphant replied to all her remarks and questions in a sort of broken Afghani, in which she strove to be his tutoress, and the lisp which accompanied her tone, added to by her eyes and rapid little ways with her hands, added to the charm of her manner.

Her features seemed sweet and girlish when, *alone* with Charlie, for a few minutes at a time her veil was partially drawn aside, to be nervously closed when Nynee or anyone drew near !

Had he been quite aware of the terrible risk he was incurring, it would have increased his anxiety to be gone, an anxiety which he never concealed from her.

'How you long to leave us,' she said, half reproachfully, on one occasion.

‘But I shall ever be thankful to you and Abdoollah Khan for your great kindness to me, and shall ever remember it.’

‘You will forget—forget all, when you get back to your own people.’

‘Pray heaven that I may go back, and soon, too!’

‘You will go back, if permitted—back to your own people, and forget all about us—about me, too; but I can hide myself in a corner of the fort, and weep and watch till death comes, but I will never—never——’ tears choked her utterance.

‘What, Myrah?’

‘Forget—*you!*’

The scales fell suddenly from Charlie’s eyes.

A lady making a similar confession within sound of the bell of St. Paul’s might do so in similar terms; but assuredly would be listened to with less alarm, and with an emotion of much greater security than Charlie heard it, in that land of tulwars and daggers, juzails and knives!

He drew back with an air of regret and bewilderment. It has been said that there is nothing so dangerous in a man, or so effective, as a well-assumed sadness, for it puts a woman off her guard, and softens her heart towards him.

But the general sadness of Charlie was *not* assumed; it was real, born of anxiety for his own situation, and thus was doubly effective with the sensitive Myrah.

She drew near him, and laying a trembling hand upon his arm, while her eyes, cast upward to his, were full of a strange light and a pleading expression which gave them great beauty, she said softly:

‘You seem unhappy?’

‘I am—very.’

‘Could I but please—but serve you—set you free!’

‘Free!’ said Charlie, in a low voice, and looking hastily round. ‘Can you do so?’

‘I can and will; but—but on one condition.’

‘Name it.’

'If you go, I too must go.'

'Where?'

'Wherever you go. Let us take flight together.'

'Together—from Abdoollah Khan?'

'Yes,' she replied, with her eyes full of tears, as she endeavoured to kiss and caress the hand of Charlie; 'to take me with you, to your people beyond the Indus—away beyond the plains of Peshawur and Jelalabad, and I will love you always—always and ever!'

The situation was perplexing, and was without 'its charm' everyway to Charlie then. 'A man who is capable of blushing after his whiskers are grown is usually a good fellow at bottom,' says some one, 'and is honest as the day is long.'

So Charlie absolutely blushed at being made love to thus, and replied coldly and gravely:

'I dare not listen to these things, and I cannot accept this regard.'

'Dare not—why?'

'Why? Are you not the wife of him who is my protector?'

'And you cannot accept my love for you?'

'No,' replied Charlie, irritated by the ridicule attaching to a position that was also full of incalculable peril.

'And why?' she pleaded again; 'were you to slay me with a knife, I would to the last moment love you the same as ever!' she continued, impetuously. 'But she—this Feringhee girl who awaits you at home—is she then so beautiful, that I seem by contrast less than the dust beneath your feet?'

She said much more to the same purpose, but in vain. As yet her manner was soft and pleading; but a terrible change might come.

Charlie listened as if turned to stone, for his position was most critical now that this woman's wild fancy had fallen on him. The jealous Nynee might utilise it to rid herself of a rival; Ferozodeen might discover it and inflame his brother; while, in wrath for his coldness, Myrah might herself work mischief, and lead to his destruction!

Some might have thought, 'The woman is but a half-heathen Afghan, with all her beauty ; use her madness as but a means to escape—to get out of the fort—the trap in which he was enclosed—and then leave her to her own fate and devices ;' but Charlie's honest spirit recoiled from treachery such as this.

It seemed to be one of the fatal idiosyncrasies of human nature, that the wife Abdoollah loved best should be indifferent to his regard, and fix her wandering fancy on Charlie, who cared not for her, and only deemed her presence and society a part and parcel of his present exceeding bad luck.

'Oh, sahib,' she said in a whisper, and looking hastily about as if she dreaded the presence of an enemy lurking somewhere, 'let us steal away together in the night-time, and go to Feringhistan, and we shall hide where none can find us. To-morrow night will find us in a grove among the hills that look down on the Khost Valley, where the trees are thick and the wild grape grows amid the jungle-grass. There I will draw my veil over your face, and sing you to sleep ; and when the dawn comes——'

'No—no—*no!*' said Charlie, emphatically ; 'even to achieve my freedom, I cannot be guilty of this treachery to Abdoollah Khan, and eventual or inevitable falsehood to yourself.'

'Falsehood to me?' she asked, growing pale.

'Urge me no more ; I would rather die !'

She eyed him sadly, reproachfully ; then gloomily and fiercely, as she said huskily :

'Die you may then ! Nay, you shall, if—if——'

She could not utter the alternative, but burst into a passion of wild weeping ; and Charlie left her, feeling unutterably perplexed by the whole affair, and thinking with dismay of Congrave's well-known couplet about, 'Love to hatred turned.'

But a new source of alarm was given him when, on the following day, Ferozoodeen, with all the wild Khels, came back at a furious pace to the fort, without Abdoollah Khan,

The risallah had been defeated with slaughter by the soldiers guarding the convoy—by the Albany Highlanders, as Charlie learned through some fragments of Stuart tartan brought back by the survivors ; and Abdoollah having his horse shot under him, was unable to ride from injuries sustained ; and was left with two followers at the hut of a goat-herd, near the road to the Peiwar Pass ; consequently the luckless prisoner was now completely at the mercy of Ferozoodeen Khan.

The lamentations of Nynee were loud indeed ; but the sorrow of Myrah seemed to be deep, as she said nothing, and rocked herself to and fro on her cushioned divan, with her veil closely drawn, as Charlie shrewdly suspected, ' to hide the tears she did not shed.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

A TERRIBLE TASK.

LEFT now in the hands of Ferozoodeen Khan, Charlie Oliphant had good reason to anticipate that evil was in store for him. If not destroyed suddenly, he might be revengefully sold into slavery, and all that he had heard of such things in the East—and not the least of them was the terrible, but never accurately known fate of those unhappy officers Stoddart and Conolly, haunted and almost maddened him.

But he was not left long in doubt that something was on the tapis regarding him.

Early on the morning after the armed rabble returned to the fort, a couple of tattered juzailchees deprived him of the cherished sword which Abdoollah Khan had restored, and ordered him to follow them before Ferozoodeen.

Another expedition was evidently afoot, as he found that personage in the act of parading all his brother's people on

a plateau before the gate of the fort. In expectation of some such summons, Charlie had not sought his charpoy that night, but snatched uneasy dozes in a long bamboo Anglo-Indian chair, evidently a camp relic of the doomed army of 1840; and he left it, as he now confidently believed, for the last time.

At that time the picturesque nature of the scene—the numerous band of Afghans in their floating garments of various colours, many wearing hairy Cabulee caps, blue turbans, peaked skull-caps, baggy white trousers, and some with sandals of straw; a few stray Mongols armed with long spears; their quaint arms and round shields; the fierce dark-bearded visages and gleaming eyes—was lost on Charlie, who also failed to see aught to interest him in the massive curtain wall and round flanking towers of the grey fort, with its groups of enormous pines in the immediate foreground, or in the mighty hills, vast, silent, and snow-capped, that hemmed the landscape in. Meanwhile an active distribution of ammunition, with chupattees and ghee for the men, and boosa for the cattle, was in progress.

From what passed around him, Charlie could gather the convoy had halted somewhere, and that another attack upon it, in concert with the Ghilzies, a warlike and numerous sept, was about to be undertaken; and he was now led before Ferozodeen Khan, who was mounted, and ever and irritably drew up the head of his horse anon from the damp morning herbage.

Ferozodeen had a very weather-beaten visage, with eyes that were small and cunning, keen and bold, but never frank. He had a genuine Afghan face, one of a strongly Jewish type. His eyelids were coloured black with *soorma*, which the women use for their eyes, and his beard was also dyed, a practice in use there when years silver it—a dandyism singular in a savage warrior. Expressive of the innate ferocity of his character there was habitually in his eyes that stony species of glitter, found only in the eyes of men

who are wont day by day to be face to face with death, and used to staring even the grim King of Terrors out of countenance.

At the present moment he eyed his prisoner with much malignant pleasure.

'Feringhee dog,' said he, 'is it not strange that we meet again, and you are yet left to live? But I have a use for you; and look well to it that you obey my orders, for upon your doing so depends the length—the shortness rather—of the time that you cumber this earth with your accursed presence.'

To this insolent and injurious speech, Oliphant simply said :

'And your intention, khan?'

'Is this: we ride towards the Khoorum river, and against the convoy again. We shall be close to it about nightfall, and when, at our approach, the nearest sentinel challenges, you will reply in the language of Feringhistan.'

'For what purpose?'

'That we may close in upon him,' replied the other, with calm ferocity; 'bury a knife in his heart—that shall be *your* task—ere he can utter another sound, or fire a shot of alarm; and then—then, *Ev-Allah!* the spoil is ours, the slaughter theirs.'

Charlie of course understood all this, and that, the sentinel once disposed of, the convoy might be completely surprised, assailed in its very heart, and a helpless carnage of his comrades must ensue.

'If I refuse, khan?' said he, boldly.

'Refuse!' exclaimed Ferozoodeen, his voice rising to a roar as he snatched a long iron pistol from his shawl-girdle; and then he laughed as he pressed the cold iron muzzle against Charlie's temple with such force as to leave there a red and livid ring; 'I shall leave you little time between dying and obeying.'

'Be it so—lead on then!' panted Charlie, through his tightly-clenched teeth,

To decline further would be but to court instant death uselessly ; to pretend to accept the duty might afford him a chance of escape, while in the fort he seemed to have none. He could but die at the last moment, ere the sentinel could be assassinated ; and with his own voice, though its last utterance on earth, he would give a stentorious alarm. Even in doing so, and in perishing, he knew that the rifles of his comrades would avenge him.

‘To prayer—to prayer!’ exclaimed Ferozoodeen, as he leaped from his horse, ‘and let it be brief. What saith the Koran? “When ye march to war, it shall be no crime in you if ye shorten your prayers, in case ye fear the infidels may attack you, for the infidels are your open enemy.” He who knoweth the Koran, needs no other book on earth.’

It was a somewhat impressive sight to see nearly a thousand picturesque-looking cut-throats all kneel down at once, and with bowed heads bent eastward, mutter their morning orisons, after which there was a terrible clatter of weapons as they all sprang up, and those who had horses or yaboos leaped into their saddles.

At another time the aspect of Ferozoodeen Khan would have impressed Charlie differently from what it did on that particular and most uncomfortable occasion. The recent plunder of some *kafila*, or a portion thereof, had improved his costume and equipment. He no longer rode a sorry yaboo, but a fine Persian horse, clean, wiry, and sinewy, with flashing eyes, quivering nostrils, and a bearing that, like its lean, active rider, denoted it a native of the wild waste.

The latter, with his keen eyes glittering under his shaggy black brows and snow-white loongee, sat motionless in his high demi-pique saddle, with his muscular figure half-concealed by the loose and voluminous garments that were draped about him, like a Saracen of the middle ages—the tulwar hanging, edge uppermost, at his saddle-bow, his shield on his back, and a bundle of daggers and pistols in his shawl,

Oliphant's wrists were now secured by a cord, which left them about three inches apart ; and with his arms thus retained in a most constrained position, he was compelled to advance at the head of the column, near Ferozoodeen Khan, and within convenient range of his pistols.

The Khel who superintended this degrading act perceived the ring of Auriel, which had hitherto escaped notice ; and with a diabolical grin he appropriated it, knife in hand, so resistance would have been worse than useless.

He was perfectly conscious that, with others, Myrah was at the gate of the fort, watching his departure ; but he never looked once towards her.

A party of mounted men — picked sowars — rode in advance ; but as so many were on foot, and as the path they had to traverse was narrow, steep, and rough, and winding, their progress was necessarily slow ; and when midday had arrived, the fort was still in sight among the mountains behind.

The district was lonely, though in some places the black tents of the shepherds of the Khostwal tribe were occasionally seen, pitched in a shady ravine ; for the Afghan population may be simply divided into two great classes — the dwellers in tents and the dwellers in houses — and most of the women of the former go unveiled.

In one place, where the road dipped down over a khotal, Charlie saw an old artillery gun — the relic of some former war — lying half buried, wheels and all, in a cascade that foamed through a nullah of stones, beyond the reach of all, where doubtless it had been thrown by some retreating force.

In some places through which they marched, a fierce wind and subtle penetrating dust were encountered, though the Safid Koh was sheeted in dazzling snow ; and when near villages, and the ground was rough, the clattering hoofs of the advanced guard were heard upon the plank bridges over the deep marshy ditches and steep banks connected with the irrigation-works.

Charlie, as he toiled on, watched all the features of the country keenly. In one place, they passed an old Buddhist tope or sacred grove, with the walls of a ruined monastery, and a pleasant temporary hiding-place it would have formed for a time could he have but reached it unseen ; but he would be far from it ere night fell.

The Ghilzies, a tribe which according to Elphinstone, and as given by Thornton, musters 600,000 of a population, were to send a strong force from the mountains on their side ; and as an earnest of this, a Ghilzie warrior, wearing a large yellow turban, met the Khels on the road, and after a long conference with Ferozodeen Khan—a conference during which Charlie found that he was frequently referred to—proceeded to accompany them.

‘Were a holy Jihad properly proclaimed,’ said the Ghilzie warrior, ‘the war here would end in one day, and all the spoil of the invader be ours.’

‘Even without the aid of such angels as God sent to aid the Believers at the battle of Bedr,’ replied Ferozodeen, for the Koran teaches the Moslems to believe that 5000 of such beings on black and white horses, and wearing white and yellow turbans, fought with them under the banner of the Prophet, whose name is never out of the mouths of the Afghans.’

‘I put my faith in the Muscovites rather than in those Feringhees from behind the Indus,’ said the Ghilzie chief.

‘The Muscovites—whose dogs are they, that they, either, should come here to laugh at our beards? They are but thieves and unclean beasts, even as the English are ; and as for their tool Shere Ali, he is false and weak as Akhu or Ebn Shoraik were to the Prophet.’

And much more in the same fashion and style reached the prisoner’s ears from time to time, as the long, winding and picturesque cavalcade pursued its irregular march up hill, down vale, and across nullahs, dry or wet watercourses—stumbling among stones and huge boulders, anon getting en-

tangled among long grass or dwarf trees, and twice passing tiny villages consisting of rough caves hewn out of the precipitous sides of the cliffs, and from the openings in which the sheepskin-clad denizens peeped forth like the satyrs or sylvani of classical times.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE CONVOY ATTACKED.

FROM the silence that was enjoined by Ferozodeen Khan and some other rascals in authority under him, Charlie Oliphant supposed the Khels were now drawing near their prey, and that the time was approaching in which he had so awful a part to act ; and his heart beat quick and painfully, while his soul seemed to grow maddened within him.

It was nearly dark now, but a red ray of light seemed still to linger on the stupendous snow-capped summits of the Safid Koh. Through flying misty clouds a few stars struggled to show themselves ; the crape-like vapour was floating from east to west through the heavens ; and a damp cold breeze, that seemed to hint of snow, stole along the mountain-slopes and left bank of the Khoodum, rustling the jungle-grass and mingling in sound with the ripple of the flowing current.

Charlie looked at the snow-clad peak, where the pinky red had faded out at last, and then at the stars, as he marched on with head erect and resolute step ; and could it have been seen, his face would have shown that he was already looking far into the future, and had made up his mind to act bravely, though his sacrifice would never be known—to endure martyrdom without fear or shrinking, and to die that night, if he could not save his comrades from a cruel and overwhelming surprise.

Stumbling on, the unsteady march was continued over innumerable water-cuts and irrigation-channels in the low-

lying places, rocky ravines, hollows and jungly places on the hill-slopes along which the narrow bridle-way wound ; but no chance of eluding his captors, or of escaping, occurred to the prisoner of war, as the Afghans were in front and rear, and kept a sharp watch upon all his movements ; besides, the manner in which his hands were manacled by a cord, which the night-dews were tightening, rendered him inexpressibly miserable and helpless.

Midnight had passed, and the colder hours of the morning drew on. The moonlight had lingered for a little space upon the summits of the Safid Koh, and after it faded out the darkness deepened over all the lower portions of the country, though the mist had passed away completely.

The advanced guard, or scouting horsemen, yet toiled on in front, dashing sometimes into a stream, the matches of their juzails glowing in the starlight, which reflected light flashes from their weapons as they caracolled and spattered the water about. But soon the stars, which in Afghanistan are of a superlative brightness unknown in Europe, save perhaps in the north, were darkened again, and snow-flakes began to fall ; and being clad in his thin Highland doublet, Charlie shivered with the cold.

Suddenly the advanced horsemen came cantering back to Ferozoodeen Khan, and the order to halt was passed along the column in whispers from front to rear.

Some lights and sounds in front announced the presence of the long, straggling convoy of horses, camels, and yaboos, laden with provisions, ammunition, and other stores, in open ground overlooked by a long ridge of low rocks on one side, and by a high range of hills, where the expectant Ghilzies were supposed to be lurking, on the north, and from whence, on the first sound of firing, they were to come rushing down, maddened with bhang, the lust of rapacity, and armed to the teeth.

By order of Ferozoodeen, his whole armed force, save a chosen band, made a swift detour to the right, creeping along

the line of rocks, parallel to the flank of the convoy, with orders to circle round in its rear; while he advanced softly towards its head, favoured by the snow which was falling; and seizing the end of the cord which bound the hands of Oliphant, he dragged him forward, reminding him of the task he had to perform, and enforcing the memory thereof by the production of a loaded pistol.

Save a few which were concealed by cloaks or wrappings, all matches on the juzail-locks had been extinguished; and while Ferozodeen and Charlie crept slowly forward, the notes of a solitary bagpipe made the heart of the latter leap wildly within him.

The musician struck up 'Johnnie Cope,' usually the alarm or warning for the march in Scottish corps.

'Thank God!' exclaimed Charlie; 'the convoy is in motion—in motion already!'

He also knew, as did Ferozodeen, that this would bring the whole escort under arms; that the intended surprise would perhaps be baffled, as the march was evidently to be begun an hour *before* daylight—an event which he never anticipated. So, as he knew not a moment was to be lost in giving the signal of attack to the Ghilzies, he crept forward again, stooping low on his horse's mane—forward so close, that the miserable Charlie could already see two Highland sentinels of his own regiment standing motionless on their posts, as he knew, with arms ordered, loaded, and bayonets fixed, and their kalkee helmets seemed so to melt into the misty obscurity of the haze that they actually looked like bodies without heads.

'Who comes—there!' cried one suddenly, shouldering his musket, and then instantly coming to the 'ready,' as he saw something near him in the dark, he knew not what.

'Answer, dog!' said Ferozodeen, hoarsely, and pressing his pistol furiously to the left temple of Charlie, whose heart beat so fast that he felt half suffocated, but who, by a sudden thought or impulse that had not before occurred to him, and

that sprung to his brain unbidden at the moment, snatched the barrel with both hands, forcing it, with the hand and arm of Ferozoodeen, in the air, where the weapon exploded harmlessly ; but instantly to be followed by a red sputtering fire of rifles from the chain of sentinels, flashing out amid the gloom in quick succession round the convoy ; while the pickets came rushing up in support, and where the main body of the escort were already all under arms, ere the last notes of the warning-pipe had died away.

The spirited Persian horse of Ferozoodeen Khan reared wildly back upon its haunches, a motion by which Charlie was dashed backwards heavily on the ground, escaping a sweeping stroke from the tulwar which the rider had clenched between his teeth, to be instantly ready for use.

'*Rabbi'lâlamina!*'* yelled Ferozoodeen. 'Forward ! Close in—close in ! Fight not at a distance. When you see the eyes of dogs, to your swords, and Cabul them !'

Oliphant staggered to his feet, fettered as he was, with difficulty, and amid the snow-flakes, and under the dim morning starlight, could see nothing but a wild tumult of men and horses, streaming manes, floating garments, flashing tulwars, shields struck by musket-shot whirling in the air, all the juzail-matches now shining like glow-worms in the dark, showing distinctly where the match-lock men were crouching ; girths parting, saddles giving way, and Afghan horse and foot rolling over each other in wild confusion, with shrieks, yells, and maledictions on one hand ; and on the *other*, dead silence, save the rattle of the breech-loader, or the occasional word of command, and the quick, red flashing of the biting and independent rifle-fire, as the Highlanders and Ghoorkas closed up shoulder to shoulder in two ranks, and though blazing away half at random in the gloom and obscurity, knocked over the infuriated foe like ninepins on every hand.

To reach the convoy without being shot down in the attempt was at that moment utterly impossible ; and to avoid

* Lord of men, genii, and angels.

the fire of the escort, Charlie threw himself upon the ground among the killed and wounded, and by contriving to roll away unnoticed for some minutes, began to think himself already almost safe, perhaps free, and something pious in the way of thanks escaped his lips, when he stumbled, fell, and unable to help himself, rolled headlong down—down—he knew not where, till his head came violently in collision with a stone, the root of a tree, or something else, he never knew what ; and he lay there, stunned, confused, stupefied, and well-nigh senseless, while the din of the conflict seemed to be passing quickly away, for the Khels were utterly discomfited with great slaughter, and the Ghilzies, for some reason unknown, failed to form a junction with them, or to come to the attack in time, though with such enterprising mountaineers, so long as they can find aught to loot, even at the risk of blood, in their valleys, the instinct to do so is generally all-powerful.

The toil of a long night's march, manacled and over such rough ground, together with the mental strain and agony he had endured for so many hours up to the culminating point when he heard the sentinel's familiar challenge—all together, with the shock of his fall, made Charlie remain where he lay, in a species of stupor, in a deep stony nullah, while the snow fell heavily ; but some stunted mulberry trees that found root amid the stones and rocky fissures afforded him some shelter, or he might otherwise have perished of cold and sheer exhaustion, as he had received no food since leaving the fort, the khan in his cruelty refusing to afford him even a single chupattie, or little cake, as sustenance.

When he became thoroughly conscious, dead silence reigned around him ; the sky overhead was of the deepest blue, and, stiff and sore and low in spirits, though, as he hoped, free, he staggered up and crept slowly out of the nullah to look cautiously around him.

Snow covered all the open ground where the convoy had been—for every trace of it had departed save some blackened

heaps that marked where cooking-fires had been—and though the snow had drifted rather deeply over the route it must have taken, he knew not whether to the Khoorum Fort or our other advanced post at Ali Khel, he doubted not being able to follow it.

No living creature was in sight.

Near him, where the drifted snow had left the grass partially bare, the slope was dotted by the bodies of slain Khels lying prostrate, with arms outspread, and their pallid or pea-green visages turned upward to the morning sun, gleaming ghastly and strange, with their eyes glazed and fixed. In some places great patches of blood discoloured the well-trodden snow.

Two Ghoorkas lay there dead.

'Thank heaven—not even one Highlander!' exclaimed Charlie. If any had been wounded they must have been taken away, for no vestige of tartan or of red coat met his eye.

Suddenly the latter detected the glittering blade of an unsheathed cookerie lying near one of the Ghoorkas. He placed the point of the sharp, crooked weapon against the stem of a mulberry-tree, and the handle against his breast, and thus contrived with ease to cut through the cords that bound his stiff and swollen wrists, and a sigh of joy escaped him when free from the degradation of manacles; and armed with this solitary weapon he set out in search of the convoy, the track of which, however, soon became obliterated in the fast-falling snow, and he was compelled, with a heart that began to sink again with doubt and despair, to take shelter in a tope, or grove of mountain-pines.

A strange sense, as it were, of an unreality in his situation was floating through Charlie's mind as he lingered there at that miserable time; yet he saw everything about him with a vivid distinctness of detail, even to the gnarled knots of a vast pine, the bare branches of which showed darkly out athwart the noonday sky, now murky and saffron in hue, with cold snow-flakes falling about it.

Soon after he entered the grove he came suddenly upon a horse, saddled and bridled, quietly grazing in the sheltered glade. He hastened forward to capture it, but too hurriedly, as the startled animal, with its reins trailing, broke into a swift gallop and was quickly out of sight.

Full of hope, Oliphant was about to dash after it, when a cry of horror escaped him, for there among the rank grass he stumbled over what appeared to be the remains of the late rider—some clothes clotted with blood ; further on fragments of bones, and near them a head entire, half rolled in a yellow turban—the head of the Ghilzi chief of yesterday, who had too probably sought the shelter of the grove, wounded, and fallen helplessly a prey to wild animals.

This sight, with all it suggested, proved too strong for Charlie's nerves. He quitted the fatal tope instantly, and began to wander up an open valley, he knew not whither—for action and movement were absolutely necessary for self-preservation—and with the choking and blinding snow beating in his face and accumulating under foot at every step.

When about to sink altogether, he unexpectedly found himself near a mountain hut, close to which a flock of goats were huddled together for warmth and shelter under a species of shed. He approached in desperation. He might obtain food, shelter, and mercy by proffering bribes, and, if protected, be taken to the British camp. If not, he could but die once, and to do so speedily under the knives of the Afghans was easier than to endure a lingering death in the snowy wilderness.

He staggered to the door, which was opened by one of those Jadran goat-herds, who in costume, appearance, and habits of life, are more like mountain bears than human beings. Another and another appeared, and then two of the Mirzan Khels, whose shouts mingled with those of the uncouth shepherds as they dragged Charlie within exultantly, and he found himself again before Abdoollah Khan, who lay,

weak and ailing to all appearance, on a couch of skins, awaiting a conveyance to his fort !

The stolid Afghan was confounded by the sudden apparition of Charlie there ; and taking from his bearded mouth the tube of a cherry-stick pipe, he could only mutter for some minutes a succession of '*Mashallas ! Wallah Billahs !*' and many an '*Allah kerim !*'

A pang, like absolute physical pain, shot through the heart of the prisoner on finding himself once more in the hands of Abdoollah, after all he had undergone ; and though remembered last, not least was his just dread and grotesque horror of Myrah in the time to come.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

INVALIDED.

TO lie upon a bed of sickness, even though the bed one lies on be of the most luxurious kind and in a stately, airy and fragrant chamber, with the attendance of the most gentle and dainty of nurses, is hard enough at times, and even when the nauseous potions of the doctor are administered by loving snow-white hands and in cups of silver or china ; but it was harder still, in the case of Duncan Daljarroch and others, who were lying in the wards and white-washed stone chambers of the ruinous and dilapidated Khoorum Fort.

No one there had a loving hand to soothe the feverish hours, or caress his head as it turned fretfully on the pillow, though Dr. Marrowbone and his staff of assistants and orderlies, native and European, were all that could be wished for in men, and especially in such a desolate and horrible place.

The miserable fate that had befallen Charlie Oliphant, had added to the illness under which Daljarroch laboured—the inflamed wound consequent to the bullet or slug which was

lodged in his right thigh, not far from the hip, and defied every effort at extraction, till the surgeons were fain to let it alone, and leave the luckless patient to live or die in peace.

Daljarroch had always loved his younger comrade as an elder brother might have done.

'Poor Charlie!' thought he; 'his love for Auriel—that is all over and done with now; but, like the earl, I always thought that his hopes were madness in a worldly point of view. Yet what has my success been? A madness too!'

But the dictum of Dr. Marrowbone and others had inexorably gone forth, and by dhooly, ambulance-waggon, or other conveyance, Duncan was to leave the Khoorum Fort, recross the Indus, and, with other invalids of all ranks, begin the long, long journey homeward, for the land that some of them might never live to tread.

To his active spirit how sad it was to be stretched there, with nothing to do but recall the faces of those Highland comrades he might never see again, and of those he never more *could* see—some who were lying in lonely graves in Central India, under the drooping palm-trees; some under the sad waves of the Arabian Sea, with the cannon-shot at their skeleton feet; some sleeping in the savage passes of Afghanistan, with the red tartan on their hearts and the shadow of the pine-tree over them—pines to which those of their native hills were but as dwarfs.

So Duncan, as he lay on his charpoy in the Khoorum Fort, watching for the last time the sunshine fading on the long range of the Safid Koh, which extends from the Shuturgardan Pass to the Khyber Pass, thought sadly over dead visions and abortive schemes of the past, and how much kinder it would have been if Fate had found a grave for him there amid those snowy slopes, than to send him home thus, before he had done aught to win rank, or name, or fame—whereas he was returning, as the cold-blooded earl would only deem him, a crippled beggar!

Six months' batta had been issued to the troops—1095'12

rupees to a captain—and every anna of this he had transmitted to Augusta, as he was ignorant how matters were going with the returned prodigal and his claims.

It had been Duncan's thought, that with his Indian pay and allowances, he was independent of the fortune he had lost ; but then how about Augusta, and all to which she had been accustomed, and had infallibly lost by her marriage with him ?

A hundred horrible fears and fancies haunted Duncan as to what might have happened in his absence, for the age is one of scandal and one of desperate wickedness ; and from the day he was wounded, no letter—by some fatality—had ever reached him from his mother, and he knew no more of what was passing at home than if he had been at the bottom of the ocean.

'I don't care if I never get better, doctor,' said he, on one of his desponding days.

'Why, you talk as if life, or all its interests, had passed away from you ! What do you mean?' asked little Dr. Marrowbone, with some fretfulness of manner. 'You are in your prime, Daljarroch !'

'No ; the prime of the heart is past and gone with me.'

'Tuts ! don't know what has come over you ; but you'll be as jolly as a sandboy yet.'

'It may be, doctor,' sighed the patient ; 'but I rather think not.'

The doctor eyed him under his shaggy brows curiously, sadly, and with interest, for there was evidently some secret lurking under this gloom that he did not and could not fathom, and which was at variance with his former knowledge of Duncan Daljarroch.

'Would that I could begin the drama of life again !' thought Duncan ; 'life, even without the bright Augusta in "the cast." Well, well, so far as I am concerned she is out of it now, and the play—the game of existence—must be carried out to the bitter end—without her !'

So the long homeward journey began slowly, from the mountains, by Fort Jamrud and the mud-built huts of Peshawur ; and the Indus was crossed at Attock, where the broad river tumbles and roars among enormous boulders and long ridgy ledges of rock ; and Duncan felt that he had bidden adieu for ever to the old Albany Highlanders.

The plains of the vast Punjaub were yet to be traversed ere he could reach the 'iron-horse' that was to take him to Bombay—plains, with their arid soil and stunted shrubs in some places, great crops of wheat in others, with the richest fruits in the world, orange and lime, peach, grape, and apricot, all in profusion in their turn ; but Duncan caught himself often thinking, more earnestly than usual, of the soft fresh breezes of his native hills, of the pastoral glens where herd and hirsel grazed ; of the villages and lanes ; of the pink and white hawthorn scenting the evening air ; of the primroses on the sward, the golden buttercups in the fields—the very wild flowers that grew by the hedgerows ; of a little trouting burn that flowed under the long yellow broom, and under a tiny rustic bridge formed by a single stone, to his infant eyes a work of art and power, at the foot of his father's garden among the Campsie Hills—the burn wherein he had fished for minnows, playing the truant from school many a day and oft ; and with all his love of the regiment, he longed with a longing that was intense to see Scotland once again, and once again to tread its soil, that he might die amid his kindred, and not find, like so many others, an unmarked grave in that strange and uncouth country.

He had with him the claymore, watch, and ring of Walter Chieslie, and similar relics of other officers, for wives or parents, and humbler mementoes of the privates, with their back pay, and the savings of some who had been the victims of a wanton and most useless war, and to whose helpless ones his once generous purse could no longer be open now as of old—a source of the keenest regret to him.

A touch of fever detained Duncan for some days at Lahore,

where he found a willing nurse in the person of our former friend Miss Polly Gushington, who contrived that her papa—then a colonel on the staff—should act hospitably to her fellow-voyager in the *Simla*.

When she heard circumstantially, so far as was known, the fate of Charlie Oliphant, she expressed natural regret—perhaps shed some tears for the poor fellow ; and for a time she regarded with more genuine interest his photo, which figured in her album, among a multitude of other smart young fellows in all manner of uniforms, especially probationers for the Indian Staff Corps, and for her own fair hand as she fondly hoped—for this young lady angled for hearts with great skill ; but they were generally hearts lightly won and lightly lost, so she soon forgot—just as she did her first attack of the prickly heat—her tears for Charlie, and galloped off to the great promenade at the band-stand with Spurrier Clank of the Bombay Lancers, who had come up country on the staff, only escaping Mrs. De Tomkyns Browne in time to save her perhaps from a serious fiasco.

After his quarters in the Khoorum Fort, the Indo-European house of Colonel Gushington seemed a veritable palace to Daljarroch.

The room he occupied, with windows opening on a verandah (beyond which loomed in the distance the Shahdarah, or great quadrangular mausoleum of the Emperor Jehangire), was spacious, yet strange to the eyes of a European. The white walls were bare, save where a few engravings in maple frames were hung on them.

There were white Chinese mats in lieu of carpeting, and hard and stiff chairs and sofas of cane, in some instances cushioned with damask. Two large chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The doors and windows—and the sides of the room seemed entirely composed of these apertures—were furnished with movable green jalousies, through which might be detected peering, at times, the curious eyes of the numerous and inquisitive native servants and punkahwallahs, who were

usually squatted on their hams in the shady verandah without; and near his couch were beautiful vases of freshly-gathered flowers, selected by the hands of Miss Gushington and her favourite ayah.

The illness under which Duncan Daljarroch laboured—the irritation of his unhealed wound and a feverishness, partly jungle ague, caught by exposure or night duties—were aggravated by the knowledge that he had come on his downward journey so far as Lahore, and yet no letters had reached him from his agents in Scotland, or anyone else; and hence his mind became a prey to the darkest anticipations of—he knew not what—as he took the railway for Benares.

But luckily he did not hear the doubts so confidently expressed by Colonel Gushington and Spurrier Clank, as they saw him off at the station, and quietly lit their Chinsurah cheroots, that ‘he would never live to see Europe.’

CHAPTER XLIX.

UNDER PRESSURE.

THE sweet spring-time had come again, and the earl was at Abercairnzie with a little party, including the Misses McCringer—showy, flighty, and hawked-about Edinburgh girls—the inevitable Sir John Lennell, and Sidney St. John; the former ostensibly for some rod-fishing in the Forth and Endrick (though he had *other* game in view), and the latter to kill time till the spring drills began at Hounslow.

Sir John, though a keen fisherman, seemed daily to thresh the waters of the Carron, the upper Forth, and the Endrick—‘sweet Innerdale’—whose deeps contain a treasure in the way of scaly salmon, but apparently threshed in vain. He never filled his creel, greatly to the amusement of burly Lord Drumsheugh, who would stand for hours in the middle of a

rushing mountain stream, fortified by mackintosh without, and Glenlivat within, landing fish after fish in the most workmanlike way on the sedgy bank ; but, if the sport lay there, the baronet's thoughts were elsewhere, as he had come to Abercairnie to angle for something else, as the earl knew well.

The shock of the abrupt tidings with which we last left her, had cast its shadow over Auriel Menteith, and remained over her still. After the first storms of secret grief—storms indulged in only amid the solitude of her own chamber, and the silence and darkness of night, when no eye save that in heaven was upon her—a great calm seemed to come over her, and she took her place as usual in the world, yet was not of it ; and when she smiled, it was as ‘Patience on a monument, smiling at grief.’ But as weeks became months she seemed once more herself, to all save those who knew her well and watched her closely.

The effort of having to act a nonchalant and careless part was great and severe at times ; but she put a mighty pressure on her tender frame and aching heart, and achieved in a great manner the art of concealment—concealment of her grief at least, for she had not one human being with whom to share it.

‘She looks pale, poor girl !’ said Sir John, in a kindly tone, to the earl on one occasion ; ‘ill indeed, I fear.’

‘Well, as old Drumsheugh says, “matrimony is a cure for most disorders.”’

‘A coarse fellow to quote, Abercairnie,’ said Sir John, a little impatiently.

‘My dear fellow, you have the game in your own hands here ; Auriel is *distracte*, after our last season in London, for which she seemed quite unfitted. All she requires is what the French call a *distraktion*—a separation of thought—and you are the very man to give her this.’

Sir John smiled, and the earl said this because he suspected that his listener was not without an inkling of a fancy

—‘some romantic, idiotic, girlish fancy’—in Auriel’s heart for a penniless young fellow, now happily, he believed, beyond her reach ; a fancy which he doubted not her good common sense, knowledge of position, and more than all, time, must obliterate, as thoroughly as if it had never existed. There was the great love Sir John bore her, with his brilliant offers on one hand, thought the earl, with the conviction on the other that no woman ever marries her first love—or man either, he believed.

‘While we are on this topic, Sir John,’ said the earl, twiddling with his gold eye-glasses, ‘be assured of one thing—she will never marry anyone whom she does not love thoroughly, though I never deemed that a necessary ingredient in a transaction so legal as matrimony ; legal in so far as we consult with our lawyers first, and leave the matter to lawn-sleeves afterwards,’ he added, with one of his aristocratic simpers, which were all from his fine false teeth outwards.

Such cold-blooded views of life and one of its dearest ties made good Sir John shiver : but he knew the general tone of the mind of his would-be father-in-law ; so he only laughed, and to change the subject turned to Sidney St. John, who now lounged into the library, cigar in mouth.

‘Now, Abercairnie,’ said the baronet, ‘here is one who should be a candidate for matrimony, and be thinking of settling in life.’

‘Kind of you to suggest this, Sir John—very,’ lisped the hussar ; ‘but I can’t afford to chuck myself away just yet, don’t you know.’

‘Lennell is right,’ said the earl, recalling with some irritation his past and baffled views regarding this nephew. ‘You are a pleasant fellow, Sidney ; good-looking, too—a favourite with all the women. Why the devil don’t you marry ?’

‘I am waiting to be asked,’ was the quiet, insouciant reply, which seemed to veil some secret annoyance.

‘To be asked?’ replied the earl with hauteur. ‘Don’t act the fool, but go and ask some suitable girl. You seem to me to be just the kind of fellow who, if not taken in hand, will play the fool in the end.’

‘How, uncle?’

‘By marrying a barmaid, or some such enterprising party!’ said the earl, angrily; while, influenced by what thoughts it is impossible to say, Sidney palpably changed colour, smiled languidly, nodded, and lounged away.

‘Egad, there isn’t the *verve* among the young folks nowadays that existed in my time!’ said his uncle, emphatically.

Malcolm, Earl of Abercairnie and Viscount Ochertyre in the Peerage of Scotland, Baron Birgham in that of Great Britain, Deputy-Lieutenant of his county and Hereditary Keeper of the old historical peel of Gargunnock, had to keep up his position on a large but sorely encumbered estate. By drawing his purse-strings freely, Duncan Daljarroch had done much to amend monetary matters; but he did not do all that was eventually necessary, as Messrs. Wadsett and Thirlage had more than once to remind his lordship.

He knew that his only son’s heirship—little Lord Ochertyre, an Eton boy—was a recognised fact by all about him, and that he would thus learn early habits of consequence and expense. *His* matrimonial future was a matter of limitless surmise, but required consideration only in the future.

Ochertyre, when his wild oats were sown and his time came, must, the earl knew, go in for matrimony with cash; must hook the (perhaps) unsophisticated heart of some little heiress. He, the heir to an ancient earldom, could find little difficulty in doing that which every day proved so easy to rubbishy ministerial and new creations; but ere that time came he would inevitably have acquired limitless tastes on a very limited allowance. Agricultural prospects were bad, and likely to beso for some time to come; farms were left without farmers; some—the communists!—were seeking reduction of rents; others were unable to pay any; cottages were

out of repair ; Abercairnie woods wanted thinning ; the game season had come nearly to nothing—the cursed rain had drowned half the birds. What the devil was to be done ? thought the earl ; the girl must marry Lennell, or he would know the reason why !

For the last time, he resolved to put her folly and her obstinacy before her in language there would be no misunderstanding. Auriel was now to him a source of trouble and vexation of spirit ; and times there were when, but for his matrimonial views, he would have wished her a little girl again in short frocks, with her golden hair hanging over her shoulders. But of late she had been passive, indifferent, automaton-like, without a will of her own as the earl began to think, exactly in the mood of mind to act reasonably, and comply with his wishes when Sir John again addressed her.

Sooth to say, Auriel deemed the rejected lover's visit to Abercairnie bad taste ; but in her gentleness and indifference, no hint escaped her that she did so.

We have shown the general tenor of the earl's mind, his wants and his wishes ; thus the reader may easily imagine all that he had to urge upon Auriel in seeking to bend her to his views, in his anger at one time actually taunting her with her lost lover, and speaking of the scene in Mayfair as something to be atoned for.

'Mr. Oliphant was at least a gentleman, papa,' said she, while her tears fell fast ; 'and a monarch on his throne, in some respects, can be nothing more !'

'Egad, Lady Auriel, that is the very communism of Daljarroch, the blacksmith's son !' exclaimed the earl in great wrath—for him, at least. 'Do you mean to tell me that birth, title, fortune, are all as nothing ?'

'Nothing as compared to genuine merit ; and poor Mr. Oliphant was not without his claims to birth and name too, papa.'

'Pretensions, say. Every man in Scotland has the same ; it is a national idea—I mean a provincial idea or weakness.'

‘But he—he is gone now, papa ; let us name him no more—no more !’

‘So be it,’ said the earl, while his daughter made a gasping effort to restrain her emotion.

She sat still as a statue ; the subject so harshly referred to seemed to have taken all power of volition from her sweet face and form ; her head drooped forward on her breast, and her hands, white as the winter crocus, lay powerless in her lap. After a pause she said, in a strangely calm voice :

‘You compel me to yield ; so my life—not my happiness, certainly—I sacrifice to your whim and ambition.’

‘Taunt me not with ambition, Auriel,’ said the earl, with the first softness of manner he had yet shown, ‘but remember that you are a Menteith of Abercairnie, and Lennell is but a baronet of the seventeenth century ! While my “whim,” as you term it, secures your future and your happiness certainly, as the wife of a man, good, amiable, honourable, generous, and second to none in the circle we move in.’

He coldly, for warmth was not in his nature, kissed her bowed forehead, and left her ; and some time passed ere she raised her head and went forth from the house, tying on her garden-hat as she went on to the lawn, scarce knowing where, with a strange expression of resolve on her white little face. She had often striven to bring herself to appeal, as a daughter had a right to do, against the mode in which she was assigned to her present suitor, and partly appropriated by him ; but her heart had shrunk from the task, lest she might be taunted as she had just been. And now, as a kind of sequel to that, and the whole past bitter conversation, her brother, the heedless little lord—who had just returned from trawling, with rod in hand, a basket of fish at his back, his kilt, sporran, and hose drenched with wading, and his cheeks glowing like winter apples—came hurrying towards her, saying :

‘Only think, Aurie, what I have just seen in the parish church of Abercairnie !’

'What took you there, Ronald?'

'My legs, Aurie; but I didn't go to pray, you may be sure, though the door was wide open. I went to count my fish on a tombstone—the tomb of Earl Ronald, who fell at the battle of Sark—three dozen and three all beauties, four of twenty pounds weight, and marked with red and black spots as big as sixpence—some of them bull-trout, Aurie, that rose to the fly splendidly.'

'But what did you see, Ronald?'

'Oh, I forgot: men putting up a white marble tablet in memory of Daljarroch's friend.'

'Daljarroch's friend,' repeated Auriel, faintly.

'Just over where I was counting my trout—to the memory of Lieutenant Charles Edward Oliphant (yes, that's the name of the fellow)—of the Albany Highlanders—drowned in Afghanistan, and last of the Oliphants of that Ilk and Aberdalgie.'

'Who put it up—the regiment?' asked Auriel, after a pause.

'Not at all. But what is it to you, Aurie? Why, girl, you look like a ghost.'

'I knew him, Ronald—that is all,' she replied, with drooping eyes.

'Sir John Lennell ordered it, the men said.'

'Sir John Lennell!'

Auriel had no words to say more, she was so utterly confused and overcome that Lennell should, all unknown to anyone, do this for a stranger, a rival! A curious emotion of gratitude filled her heart, for it was gratitude mingled with something of annoyance that the only tribute to the memory of the loved and lost should have come from the hand that accorded it; and yet there was something noble in the act, unless, as suspicion prompted, it might have been done to impress more fully upon her a conviction that her lover was gone—blotted out of creation, and irrevocably a thing of the past!

She heard, without comprehending, her brother running on boy-like about the magnificence of his trout, and wishing, 'Oh, wouldn't he just! that he was in Afghanistan with his double-barrelled rifle, that he might knock over some of those beastly niggers,' till the ringing of the luncheon-bell, and the sound of Alpin's pipes on the terrace, brought her back inexorably to the affairs and exigencies of every-day life; and soon she found herself at the head of the table, listening to such topics as the weather, the lateness of the crops, the advantage of railways and telegraphs; Sidney's views of the spring meetings and the last matches at Lord's ground; was the puzzle-headed ministry to keep in or not! the war news, and the proposed disestablishment of the Scottish Church, which the earl wished swept away *in toto*, like everything else vulgar and 'provincial,' till her poor little head spun.

CHAPTER L.

'THE LAST APPEAL.'

SOME time after this, Sir John Lennell, a close and anxious observer of all Auriel's movements, naturally, discovered that it was her wont, when she deemed herself unnoticed, to walk across the lawn, so far as a rather sequestered place for which she seemed to have conceived a great *penchant*, the scene, if possible, of a daily pilgrimage—the Fairy Rock; for there, perhaps, a face seemed to meet her—a haunting face it was—a face that no power on earth might blot or blur out.

Intent on solitude, she stole forth alone, somewhat morbidly no doubt to think over everything once again, with the recent injunctions of the persistent earl. So—so—Charlie was indeed dead, and his monument was in the church, erected by his rival and would-be supplanter in her memory!

It was a sweet spring afternoon. The white, fleecy clouds

were as Ossian phrases it, 'divided' in blue heaven, and a broad burst of golden sunlight fell from under a bank of dun vapour on the distant slopes of Ben Ledi. Overhead the skylark hovered like a dark speck, while the mellow-voiced merle and the speckle-breasted mavis made pleasant music amid the long miles of budding hedgerows.

Afield came the jangle of the horse-gear from amid the brown furrows, where the black crows followed the shining ploughshare. A soft spring shower had fallen, bringing out, seemingly almost to the eye, the tender buds of the white hawthorn—for the season was an early one—and the young green leaves of the trees ; while a fragrant aroma stole over all, mingled with the perfume of the violets ; and in all there was a general effect that made the girl's heart grow full—full indeed—with undefinable emotions, as she took possession of a rustic seat near the old traditional rock of 'the good people.'

Floating in the distance, from the Abercairnie shrubberies, came the notes of Alpin's pipes, and they made her think of the pipes of the Albany and the Gordon Highlanders, at that moment perhaps waking the echoes of the hills that look down on Cabul ; and also think of *him* who heard their notes no more—him it would soon, she feared, be a crime to think about at all.

She listened to the old air, and murmured to herself :

' And with it comes a broken fount
Of tears I thought was dry ;
Old hopes and wishes come as wont,
And will not pass me by.'

One of those dim forewarnings of which sensitive natures in youth are liable, stole over her—a warning of evil, she thought, that came unbidden. There was a step ; she turned and met Sir John Lennell, suave, pleasant, ignoring the expression he read in her sweet face, and striving to be winning as usual, in the hope that she might learn to love him a little after all.

There could be no doubt that Sir John Lennell was one especial man among many. He was a charming companion in a club or a drawing-room, an eloquent speaker in the House, a gallant horseman in the hunting-field, and though past his fortieth year, a very handsome man, with a face and figure of unusual beauty ; skilled in the use of the rod and rifle, accomplished in music and art, with a voice that was soft, and manners that were tender and gentle.

A casual conversation began, and though it was only about the weather, the season, the beauty of the afternoon, the birds, the flowers, the trees, it was conducted by him in a low soft tone, the source of which she could not mistake.

About the memorial tablet in the church she was silent. A young widow of the heart, how could she refer to it, or thank him? Between *them* the subject was utterly unapproachable, yet it must have been erected with the earl's permission as the chief landed heritor in the parish. Was it only part of a cunning plan between them after all?

Sir John's intentions were known to many, to none better than to Lady Auriel herself. Fifty times at least she had heard all that her father had to urge on the suitability of the match—Sir John's vast wealth, his connections, his fine personal appearance ; Lennell, its 'policy,' manor-house of the days of James V., literally encrusted with armorial bearings ; the stable, court, and kennels, pineries and preserves, etc. And in vain she had urged in reply her own unworthiness, her dislike of marriage, her wish to remain single—free ; but all went for nothing, and it had become an understood thing apparently, a settled fact, that if not actually engaged to Lennell of that ilk, it must come about in time : that she was a silly girl, and knew not her own mind, or what was best for her.

Clad only in a grey suit of coarse-checked tweed, with heavy lace-up boots, each finished with a handsomely-cut *fraochan* or heath-cutting toe-piece (affected now by ladies on their little bottines), with well-fitting brown gloves, and low

hat yet garnished with some lines and flies, he looked every inch a polished gentleman, as he sat beside Auriel ; but he could little divine that there was an awkwardness about the *locale*, so far as she was concerned, for all he meant to say and her to hear.

And she looked about her like some poor little hunted animal caught in a trap from which there was no escape.

After a pause, during which more than one soft sigh escaped him, and he bowed his head over her downcast face, so close that the end of his long dark moustache nearly touched the edge of her garden-hat, and love lent a tender cadence to his voice, as he said abruptly :

‘ Lady Auriel—oh, dearest Auriel ! the happiness of my life, my hope, my future—all lie in your hands.’

‘ I am sorry to hear you say this again, Sir John, truly sorry !’ she replied, with her long lashes cast down, and her mobile lips quivering painfully.

‘ I have been patient, Auriel,’ he continued, pleadingly, ‘ and I have waited long. I will be patient still, and wait longer, if you will only give me reason to hope—to hope that I am not quite indifferent to you.’

His lips were quivering now with the intensity of his emotion ; but as he spoke, she seemed to be wholly, yet nervously, intent on buttoning a very symmetrical and close-fitting kid glove on a lovely little hand, revealing as she did so rather more than usual of a snowy arm, his proffers of assistance being so quietly and softly, yet steadily declined, that he coloured with vexation and sorrow.

‘ Speak to me, Auriel !’ said he, piteously.

‘ If this fancy, Sir John——’ she began, scarcely knowing what to say.

‘ Fancy !’ said he, impetuously ; ‘ oh, believe me, there is a great difference, Auriel, between a first fancy and a first love !’

‘ I suppose there must be,’ she replied, wearily.

‘ I am so glad you agree with me,’ said Sir John, mistaking her meaning.

'I do so—but only so far.'

'How far?'

'Don't ask me,' said she, rising to go. ('I am not *his* first fancy,' thought the girl; 'but poor Charlie was my—as I was *his*—first love!')

'Stay—stay, I entreat you!' he exclaimed, clasping her hands in his, while a proud, eager and impassioned expression lit up his face; 'hear me, dear, dear, Auriel! Fancies I may have had, as what boy has not? But you—you, as heaven hears me, are the only one I ever loved with the deep, strong, and unerring passion of mature manhood. Now hear me, darling, once again!'

In the tenderest and most seductive tones of a seductive voice, to which the depth of his love lent a wonderful pathos and eloquence, while emotion once half-choked his utterance, so genuine was the strong man's passion in what he deemed his last appeal, he urged and urged again the adoration he felt—the joy and gratitude he would feel if accepted—his hopeless future and aimless life if rejected; and the gentle, pitying, and shrinking Auriel heard him, and replied she knew not what, in a tone soft and weary, as if compelling herself to say something she had committed to memory.

But that 'something' his impetuosity overruled and swept away; his hot tears fell on her hand as he kissed it. And how it all came about she never exactly knew; but the girl had become weary of domestic or paternal pressure, and helpless resistance: and when she and Sir John—she turning her back on the Fairy Rock perhaps for ever—rose up to return to the house, each was in a dream, the former one of chaos and confusion, the latter one of supreme joy, for he was in promise and effect her plighted husband!

So the last appeal, he thought, had not been made in vain.

* * * * *

The conflict was over—the die was cast, and her fate finally decided. Her father's cold kiss and pompous congratulations, just flavoured with the little warmth that was

born of his innate selfishness, confirmed it all ; there was no retracting now, and there settled upon her heart for a time a spirit of endurance that seemed to mock itself.

She could not, when in the solitude of her own room, but feel stunned for a time by the conviction that all the romantic hopes and visions of her young life had been crushed for ever—visions as she had painted and planned them.

Among her own sex, Auriel, with all her frankness and natural warmth of disposition, though she had many companions, had no friend, no chum or chief gossip in whom to confide, with whom to confer, or lean on for advice, condolence, or congratulation.

Unaided and alone she had a part to act now as her father's daughter, when the great secret of her engagement went forth, and congratulations were poured upon her. She wept no longer now, even when alone perhaps ; and she maintained a constant reserve, a calm composure, avoiding no demand for self-control, or of the parts she had to play in a life that, with all the splendour her future husband could cast around it, she set but little store on, because she had not been the mistress of her own fate—the arbitress of her own destiny.

There was no escape now ; she was openly affianced to a man of high position and unblemished honour, and was liable to cause profound speculation and bitter surmise, if her engagement, proclaimed to, and notified by, the veto of 'society,' was not to the end *fulfilled*.

Auriel, in her heart of hearts, perhaps despised herself, though the age of being morbidly devoted to the dead (and in too many instances, now, even to the living) is a thing of the past, like chivalry ; yet she only mingled moderately in society, where her rank, beauty, and forthcoming marriage caused her to be courted, petted and caressed on every hand.

But many a day ere the fatal day—for such she yet deemed it—came, she turned to her promised husband, and marvelled in her heart how she ought to feel towards him in return for all his devotion, his extreme tenderness, his princely settle-

ments, his magnificent presents, and so forth, for he, exultant in his bride, racked his invention to please her.

She had given him her existence in return ; yet with it, not her all—her heart.

Would it be always so, and would she not by mere force of habit learn to love him in time, just as other women of the world seemed to love their husbands ?

Sir John Lennell, proud of his election, and feeling that all the adulation Auriel received was in some manner reflected back upon himself, became every hour more and more enchanted with himself and with her ; and as they were to be married immediately, Messrs. Wadsett and Thirlage, in conjunction with Sir John's 'doers,' as they are curiously named in Scotland, soon had the settlements adjusted, and the earl saw no cause for delay.

Sir John saw less certainly ; so a day was named, and hourly congratulations and beautiful gifts poured in upon the bride, who felt somewhat like an automaton in the hands of those around her.

Had Lady Auriel been a Catholic or even an Anglican, in her dire extremity she might have taken refuge in some convent or sisterhood ; but though one of an old Scottish Episcopal line (that believed in James VIII. and Charles IX., and had never prayed for the reigning house till 1788) no such wild idea occurred to her, so she yielded calmly and quietly to her fate.

CHAPTER LI.

STRANGE TIDINGS.

IT was night—an April night ; and the heart of the great city—the grey metropolis of the north—lay still in sleep under a brilliant moonshine, falling aslant from the giant bulk and blackness of the ancient capital, athwart the fair new one

that slopes downward to the sea ; and through the chill silent hours a woman sat watching (as many, many more no doubt were doing elsewhere) patiently and hopefully by the bed of the ailing, whom she would permit none other to attend.

The hours passed on, the dawn of day was stealing in red and rosy through the parted clouds of a clear and glorious April morning ; the dew-drops hung heavy on the budding leaves in the gardens, the mavis and merle were in full chorus over the birth of another day, and still the unwearied watcher sat and waited.

There was brightness without, from where the stately terrace of Queen Street looks down over its whole length upon an area of lawn with trees and flowers, but gloom and illness within—yet not altogether gloom as it is understood, and so the pale watcher thought, as she smiled to herself happily and pleasantly from time to time.

In the centre of a stately and luxuriously furnished room, stood a bed curtained with a canopy of pink silk, contrasting with the white lace hangings and coverings, and even more with the pale, somewhat pinched and yet most beautiful face that turned restlessly, half feverishly, on the pillow, to where, in a lace-trimmed berceunette, with a canopy dainty as a bridal bonnet, lay a little baby asleep, like a waxen bambino.

As the patient turned, the watcher was instantly by her side ; their hands sought each other, and their eyes met in a loving and tender glance.

The watcher was the mother of Duncan Daljarroch, whose recently born baby lay in the berceunette ; and Lady Augusta was the patient, now the source of all the old lady's care and love, in both of which she far surpassed even the faithful Fleurette.

She had joined her in her loneliness at this crisis, for Auriel, who had naturally longed to do so, had been forbidden by the earl in his groundless anger at Daljarroch, and deeming her wish but a pretence to avoid Sir John Lennell ; so Mrs. Daljarroch had come to share her dwelling *pro tem*.

—as she said, ‘till matters were arranged between her Duncan and her Willie.’ And though Lady Augusta shuddered and set her little white teeth at the name of the obnoxious and degrading relative, she welcomed heartily the kind and affectionate mother, who in every way proved one indeed to her ; for a wonderful and miraculous change had, with her young maternity, come over the spirit, mind, and temper of Augusta—a change that poor Duncan Daljarroch, then travelling wearily, in mental and bodily pain, towards Bombay, could never have dreamed of.

Her heart was every way softened now, in her time of mingled sorrow for what she had done, and of gratitude to God for her safety and that of her child ; so Duncan’s mother gladly and meekly took her place by the couch of pain, and ministered, as if she had been a daughter of her own, to the proud, wilful, and imperious girl, who had so long treated her with neglect and aversion. But that was all forgotten and forgiven now.

And she was full of gratitude to Mrs. Daljarroch, who had flown to her, replacing the hired nurses whose creaking shoes and rustling dresses, stealthy though all their motions, had made her head ache, while their treadmill tramping ‘to keep baby quiet’ maddened her, and their bowls of gruel and panado, which they first tasted and then left the spoon therein, sickened her.

All that was changed now, and she had the most gentle, noiseless, and affectionate of nurses—thoughtful, anticipating her every wish, stooping unseen to pick up the periodicals and books which, in her petulant weariness, she had tossed upon the carpet, muffling the Parisian clock to soften its monotonous ticking, shading the night-lamp lest the light might injure her beautiful eyes, or wake her when sleep came.

After the terrible ordeal through which she had passed, as the days of convalescence stole on, the crave for her absent husband’s society, and her desire to join him in whatever

part of India he might be, and for some of her own kindred to be with her—Auriel, or even her cold-hearted father—grew strong in her soul ; but neither of the latter came, though the birth of her little Duncan had been duly announced.

‘It is unpardonable—no letter from papa!’ she would wail through her tears to Mrs. Daljarroch.

‘No, darling ; but you know there have come three from Lady Auriel’ (we fear she said ‘Leddy’), ‘full of love and tenderness, and loads of kisses for baby.’

‘Dearest little Auriel ! how unkind of papa to prevent her coming ! Oh, why is it ?’

‘Because you are the wife of a poor man now, Augusta darling.’

‘Oh, mother, I wonder if Duncan will ever—ever pardon me !’

‘It was never in the heart of my Duncan to remember aught but good !’ exclaimed Mrs. Daljarroch, melted to the heart on hearing herself addressed thus.

The memory of the three terrible words she had said to him, burned as remorsefully into the heart of Augusta now, as they had done bitterly into the warm, gallant, and generous heart of Duncan. She had struck him, as it were, when he was down—down in fortune—with a stabbing speech that must have crushed out of his breast all faith and trust in woman’s loyalty and woman’s love, at least so far as she was concerned.

How could she have been mad enough—cruel enough—so insulting and soulless—as to utter those words ? As she thought them over now, she almost dreaded—though she longed, like a failing swimmer panting for the shore—to meet Duncan’s eye, and lay her head upon his breast.

‘I have given him all the misery of supposing that his pure and disinterested affection has been requited by the most sordid heartlessness ; and I have thrust away a heart that may never come back to me !’ was her ever-recurring thought.

She laughed no more at the old lady’s odd dresses and

antique bonnets with flowers that were unknown to nature, though vast 'as a bunch of vegetables' as she was wont to say; nor did she ever wince at her French, though the good dame had been sharp enough to detect that her pronounciation was not appreciated, and had ceased her favourite mode of phraseology. Yet when writing to Duncan, expressing her great joy for the change which had come over Augusta, she could not refrain from impressing upon him that all her 'lofty airs and *hawtoor* (so she spelt it) were completely gone.'

Mrs. Daljarroch's store of his treasured letters from Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Port Said, Bombay, and elsewhere, with photographic scraps of all these places enclosed, were all submitted joyfully to Augusta now, and by her conned over and over again; but the tender references to herself, that recurred in them again and again, went straight to her heart, and drew many a tear from her eye; and then baby was lifted out of the berceaunette to nestle in her white bosom, while over it, with silently moving lips and in her heart, she renewed her marriage vows, as if they were a prayer.

Her babe—*their* babe—her own and Duncan's! A depth of passionate emotion, which had been dormant in her breast, had now burst into life; and the gush of supreme maternal delight, tempered, it might well be, with anxiety for the child's future and the safety of its wounded and ailing father, with other uncertainties and misgivings, grew up in Augusta's heart.

Of course no baby like hers had ever been seen in the world before, or had such lovely little velvet fingers and pink toes! It had Duncan's eyes and Duncan's mouth, and Duncan's nose too, Mrs. Daljarroch affirmed; though the said nose was a most unpromising button as yet.

In Augusta's heart was now developed the purest and most unselfish form of affection that exists on earth—the affection in which all self is annihilated, that believes with fervour and trusts with hope; for she felt that her babe was bound to her by a tie that not even death could rend, and that its little

heart should never throb with pain or joy without a keen response from her. And suppose death were to come—oh no, no, no! that idea was too terrible for contemplation, for then existence would be without aim or object, rudder or compass, and the world as a dark and gloomy sea.

‘News of Duncan—my brave Duncan!’

‘And mine, mother—mine!’ said Augusta, as Mrs. Daljarroch hurried to her bedside with the morning paper, one day. ‘Good news?’

‘Thank God, and blessed be His name, bairn—yes! Duncan has got the Victoria Cross!’ she added, bursting into tears of admiration and tenderness, while, with white and tremulous hands, Augusta took up the paper and read:

‘The Queen has been graciously pleased to signify her intention to confer the decoration of the Victoria Cross on the two undermentioned officers of her Majesty’s army, whose claims have been submitted for her Majesty’s approval for their gallant conduct during the recent operations in Afghanistan, as recorded against their names.’

The second name stood thus:

‘Duke of Albany’s Own Highlanders—Captain Duncan Daljarroch—for his distinguished bravery at the capture of the Peiwar Khotal Pass, in saving the life of Lieutenant Cosmo Crawford, of the same regiment, by confronting five Cabulees, killing three and beating off two, though bleeding from a wound in his right thigh, and bearing off his brother officer, who, but for his timely and gallant aid, would have been infallibly cut to pieces.’

Over and over again was the Queen’s gracious intention read, and in the hearts of the mother and wife genuine pride was blended with their love for Duncan, ending with the oft-repeated wish that he was with them once again; and the days were counted which must pass ere he, worn and wounded, and all ignorant as yet of the double joy that awaited his home-coming, would once again tread on Scottish ground. But other tidings of a more startling nature awaited them,

when one afternoon the fussy, bustling little Writer to the Signet, Mr. Thirlage, sent up his card, and appeared in the drawing-room, the windows of which overlooked the vast panorama of stately streets that slope northward from the beautiful terrace, to where woods and villas fill all the lower ground, with the sail-studded Forth, and the Fife hills, soft and blue, in distance and sunny haze.

‘I have good news for you and Lady Augusta, Mrs. Daljarroch!’ exclaimed Mr. Thirlage, rubbing his hands over each other. ‘Good news indeed, my dear madam!’

‘About my son?’ she asked, breathlessly.

‘Which son, madam?’

‘Duncan—or—or—Willie?’

‘Poor Willie! Phew!’ And the little lawyer looked mysterious, and polished his bald pate with his silken bandana.

‘I wonder why my waefu’ Willie should shun me, and avoid you too, now, when every paper in the country announces Duncan’s return home from India.’

‘For that reason, my dear madam—for that very reason; but he will avoid us no more now.’

‘You have seen him lately?’ said Mrs. Daljarroch, with some anxiety of tone.

‘I met him suddenly in Prince’s Street some days ago; but he, unlike his previous wont, shrunk from me with a startled expression. His bloated countenance changed—even the grog blossoms with which our money advances so freely adorned it grew pale; he was full of embarrassment—terror, it seemed to me.’

‘He had heard that Duncan was returning, and shame for his dissipation——’

‘Pooh, my dear madam! as the elder brother, what was that to him?’

‘Aye, perhaps; what indeed, after his bad, undutiful conduct to me?’ said Mrs. Daljarroch, sadly.

‘Instead of asking me for money, he fairly fled from me.’

‘Fled! Was he intoxicated?’

'Yes ; he has been seldom otherwise since I first saw him. I tried to overtake him, but the Mound is rather a breather to me now, and I failed to do so ; he turned up the High Street, dived down a dark close on the south side towards the Cowgate, and I cared not to follow him further.'

'It is most unaccountable !'

'Seemed so to me then ; but not now, my dear madam—not *now* !'

Mr. Thirlage paused, and took snuff.

'Listen : three days after, but yesterday, I was sent for to the infirmary, where he was dying of injuries received from a fall in the streets—injuries hopelessly aggravated by the state of his blood and system.'

'My poor Willie ! my own bonnie Willie !' sobbed Mrs. Daljarroch, covering her face with her handkerchief.

'Don't waste sympathy, and don't waste tears on such a fellow,' said Mr. Thirlage, impatiently. 'Phew !' and out came the bandana again. 'He was terribly excited when he saw me ; but as the dying man became more composed, he revealed and signed, as "John Smith," a native of York, a complete confession.'

'Confession—of what ?' asked the old lady, very much bewildered.

'His roguery, and how completely he had so far duped us. He had been William Daljarroch's comrade in India, and had gradually become his confidant, and master of all the secrets of his past life and history, and of the cloudy relation in which he stood with his family. When Willie was slain by the Afghans, he had possessed himself of his "small-book," in which the description of their persons tallied, and he learned all about the mole-mark. He also possessed himself of the little latch-key of his father's house, which Willie, poor fellow, had borne about with him for years in his exile ; and as he—this John Smith—was about to be discharged, he conceived the idea of passing himself off as the dead man. He played the game pretty successfully so far, but must have

been bowled out in the end, when, from the Horse Guards and regiment, proofs must have come as to the death of your son. He has worked us a deal of trouble, mischief, and anxiety; but the mystery is ended, and the unfortunate creature has gone to his last account !'

Mrs. Daljarroch listened to this narrative in utter bewilderment; and among other thoughts that occurred to her with a thrill of superstitious terror, was the memory of her anxious dream on the very night her son was slain, when she supposed him to be outside the door of his father's house, and endeavouring, in the old way familiar to her watchful ear, to turn *the key* in the lock !

If that sound which she still seemed to hear, for it lingered vividly in her memory, was not a spirit-warning or a spirit-summons, what manner of coincidence was it, that it came at that identical moment ?

It was impossible for Mrs. Daljarroch not to feel a sense of intense relief and genuine satisfaction at the startling revelation of the little lawyer, and this new turn in the family affairs. The real Willie was dead, and had been mourned over and wept for long ago.

The impostor had, by his mode of life, been a source of horror and dismay for months, while he assumed the dead man's name and thought to obtain his inheritance, thus leading to the separation of Duncan and Augusta; but happily the heart of the latter had turned with yearning and love to her husband before the would-be usurper had been discovered, and there could be nothing but joy in the future now.

Augusta shared that joy with her to the full. She had heard of the alleged drowning of Charlie Oliphant in the Khoorum river, and naturally supposed that Auriel had griefs of her own, till she heard of her quickly approaching marriage with the handsome Sir John Lennell; and forgetting how she had been wont to speak of the former, as a mere detrimental,' she wondered *now* how Auriel could so

readily forget the poor young fellow, and all that might have been had fortune proved more kind : but she forgot too the pressure that had been put upon the wearied and worried heart of her sister.

Mrs. Daljarroch wrote instantly one of her peculiar epistles to the earl, acquainting him with what has just been related, and he was warmly congratulated by Sir John Lennell ; but, sooth to say, he cared as little for Duncan and his V.C. as for the baby in the cradle : yet the latter might, failing young Ochtertyre, be, by Scottish peerage law, the inheritor of *his* title and estates.

And so the winner of the V.C. was coming home !

‘ On my word,’ said Sir John, at their club, ‘ you ought to be proud—quite proud of your son-in-law ! What a lion the fellow must be, to face five of those fellows and knock over three of them !’

‘ Some newspaper exaggeration, I fancy,’ said the earl, eyeing his glass of port curiously between him and the sunlight. ‘ Our own specials, I dare say, see many things rosily through the medium of a good bottle of wine.’

‘ Ah, that is too bad !’

‘ I hope experience has cured him of his tenant-right ideas—his Celtic proclivities and democratic tendency to confound the orders of society.’

‘ A severe way, Abercairn, of viewing his intense interest in all that pertains to the people and their nationality.’

‘ Their provincialism you mean—the Whig-Radical dogs ! But the devil himself would never make out of Daljarroch a country gentleman, to my mind. If I talked of plovers’ or pheasants’ eggs, he replied by something about Highland depopulation ; if I talked of grouse and deer, I was reminded that the land was the inheritance of the people—their gift from God, and all that sort of thing. If I spoke of dry-nursing the fox-hound puppies, it only reminded him of farmers’ rights and the laws of trespass. The d—d fellow

is quite a communist, and only fit for Paris ! So now he'll be coming back to air his views once more of the days when the glens teemed with hardy soldiers—idle loafers, I call them—and “every rood of ground maintained its man”—all bosh, you know, Lennell ! I only go to Abercairnie when I cannot well be in London, for who that can live here would live elsewhere ? But I delegate all bother to Thirlage and Wadsett ; and with them, as with me, it is simply, that if tenants, no matter how long they may have been on the land, don't pay up in full, *out* they go !

‘But that may be hard in some instances.’

‘That is their look-out ! If I give them leave to talk, they tell me that their forefathers worshipped at the same shrine with mine (whatever the deuce that may mean !); that they followed mine to this, that, and the other battle, including Bannockburn and Flodden, of course ; and pray that if I have a spark of benevolence—benevolence ! d——n the radical communists, I can be benevolent enough if my rents are paid, and no complaint about game. Old Mackellar, at Fairy Rock, was the last who worried me in this fashion ; but he and his wife are in the workhouse—their son was killed in India, so Abercairnie is rid of the lot ! His farm is a mountain one, and is famous for its grouse. He was an out-and-out Radical. The Scots generally, Lennell, are a nation of extreme Whigs, and as such are the natural enemies of a Conservative Government ; and hence the reason that such a Government never does anything for the country—ignores its existence, in fact.’

‘What else does a Liberal Government do?’ asked Sir John, drily. ‘They are both precisely alike in that matter.’

‘You don't mean to say you would go in for Home Rule?’ asked the earl, aghast.

‘For some means of local government to expedite home business, most certainly—as a barrier to centralisation, too !’

‘Egad, you are as bad as Daljarroch—worse, indeed !’

Lennell felt indignant when the earl ran on in this heart-

less fashion ; but after a pause, during which he had been toying with his wine-glass, he said :

‘Lady Augusta will be greatly gratified by the honour conferred so justly upon her husband.’

‘She will be more gratified, I hope, by the turn his monetary affairs have taken. Auriel was anxious to have gone north to her, in that dull hole, Edinburgh ; but I prevented her then, and she can’t go now. She is full of feeling, Auriel—all impulsiveness, though I try to impress upon her it is bad form.’

The death-bed confession of the impostor had proved that Augusta’s settlements were all right, and could not be interfered with ; thus to my lord the Earl of Abercairnie, it was extremely provoking that Duncan Daljarroch was returning home, when by his timely death she might, as a wealthy widow, ally herself with one of far superior rank—a deucid bore ! But he might die of his wound after all—egad, yes !

And it seemed not unlikely that poor Duncan might do so, when the news by telegraph announced some days after that H.M.S. *Simla*—for he was on board of her again—had landed at Port Said Captain Daljarroch, V.C., of the Albany Highlanders, the agony of whose wound was augmented by the motion of the ship, and who now seemed past all hope of recovery.

This was crushing intelligence for his mother, and for Augusta, who was yet too feeble to attempt to travel so far as Egypt ; so they could but mingle their tears, and weep over the youngling whose father’s kiss might never rest upon its cheek.

CHAPTER LII.

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF AFGHAN LIFE.

By this time Charlie Oliphant was again a prisoner in the fort of Abdoollah Khan, there again to endure hourly peril.

squalor, ferocity, lying duplicity, with cant from the Koran, and the very immediate danger that might occur from the treacherous fancy of Myrah.

Yet his heart did not sink, nor did the fact of his prolonged captivity check the full tide of strong and young energy he felt within him to try and achieve his liberty again, and at all hazards. But when he was brought back, the first to plead for his freedom was Myrah, though his absence would be a loss to her own heart.

‘Set him free,’ she whispered to Abdoollah ; ‘be generous as Hassan the son of Ali, for God loveth the beneficent.’

Her voice was soft and musical, and had a strange pathos in it, while, like all women of the East, her gesticulations and little tricks of hand and manner were full of grace and animation ; but Abdoollah heard her in silence, while he hung at her neck a cornelian of Yemen, on which was inscribed a verse from the inevitable Koran, found among some loot. But there was no trinket for Nynee, who looked darkly on.

‘Why feed the Kafir dog, instead of killing him?’ asked the savage Ferozoodeen Khan, when the brothers were seated together cross-legged on a carpet, over their pipes and wine, which the Afghans often drink in secret, though forbidden by their religion ; ‘he is one of those who think to make us the gholauts and bondsmen of the Feringhee woman who lives far beyond the sea, and yet boasts herself the Kaiser-i-Hind ! But we shall teach her and her Ghoorkas, Punjaubees, and bare-legged soldiers (may they all broil in hell !) that——’

‘Enough,’ said Abdoollah ; ‘I have given him my peace. I know what I know, and what I mean to do.’

‘Remember what is written : that for every ten measures of words sent down from heaven, womankind have taken nine. So Myrah talks, and *he* listens ; do you *know* that?’

At this artful speech, a terrible expression of sudden rage and pain crossed like a spasm the face of Abdoollah, which became ghastly pale ; yet he smoked quietly and steadily on,

while his brother re-enforced his ideas with sundry scraps from the Koran, which his people ever and always quote—just as the Cromwellians and other canting Puritans cited Scripture for everything, from eating an egg to cutting a man's throat.

'I have not forgotten the smash on the head that Kafir gave me with his sword,' said Ferozoodeen, who had recently refreshed himself with a dose of opium, and consequently his inflamed eyes gleamed under their black, shaggy brows like two carbuncles; 'such a stroke as might have cleft the double-helmet of the Prophet! So Nynee has watched, and all the time *he* was away Myrah sang the "Nana" to her saringa.'

The 'Nana' is a pathetic air, referred to in Persian tales, to express the lamentations of separated lovers. Abdoollah heard him and knew the inference, but still smoked doggedly on, though the dark hints of his brother were not without a terrible effect upon him.

Could it be?

Nynee had ere this begun to drop hints which he had laid to the score of a jealous woman; but those of Ferozoodeen tallied unpleasantly with them. What if there was some secret understanding between these two—his prisoner and Myrah—some intent in common—some link already more subtle and strong than the mere position of hostess and guest?

Among these pale-faced Kafir men and women in Hindostan—the *Feringhee-logue*—Abdoollah had seen a kind of open intimacy, riding, driving, and dancing together entwined, as it seemed to his startled eyes, in each other's arms like girls at a Nautch, and much more that utterly passed the scope of his understanding.

Abdoollah felt that he had been wrong in giving to 'an accursed unbeliever' in his household all the privileges he would have accorded as usual to an Afghan Mussulman. His fingers played nervously and ominously with the khandjur

and pistols in his shawl-girdle, a sign which Ferozoodeen saw with growing satisfaction ; but the other resolved he would wait a little and watch, and if his suspicions were verified—— But a dark cloud seemed to envelop him at the thought of such an issue !

His brother's voice roused him, by saying :

' You know, Abdoollah, that as my elder brother, and the chief of my tribe, I love you ?'

Like the Othello he felt himself fast becoming, the former might have answered :

' I think thou dost ;
And—for I know thou art full of love and honesty,
And weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath—
Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more :
For such things, in a false, disloyal knave,
Are tricks of custom ; but in a man that's just,
They are close denotements, working from the heart,
That passion cannot rule.'

Ferozoodeen saw that now the train was fully fired, and all the usual 'trifles light as air' began to occur and suggest themselves to the readily inflamed jealousy of his brother's Oriental mind.

' When returning from the goat-herd's hut,' said he, ' I saw a falling star above our fort here, indicative of the firebrand by which good angels scare away the bad. I took it for a sign, I knew not of what, brother ; but, Allah kerim ! I see it all now ! And I would rather that Myrah were in the City of the Silent, with her spirit seated at the head of her own grave, than hear all this of her in the body.'

' Take off her ornaments and fasten bells to her feet,' said Ferozoodeen, scornfully ; and Abdoollah winced, for the courtesans of Arabia, like those of some parts of India, wear golden bells at their elbows and ankles.

Whether Ferozoodeen Khan had a suspicion of Myrah, it is impossible to say ; but it is most probable that he acted on some hints from Nynee, and that in his wrath, and to gratify his insane hatred of Oliphant, he did not shrink from involving her in his ruin and destruction. For what was she but a

woman after all, and a wife is more easily replaced than a good horse in the East !

'To me, Ferozoodeen, she has always been sweet as the Rose of a Hundred Leaves !' said Abdoollah, in a broken voice ; 'an idol such as could not be met with in the house of Azor,' he continued, passing a hand over his brow, 'the carver of beautiful idols for the father of Abraham ! When I brought her hither the sun seemed to shine more brightly, and the air to grow fragrant as if a kafila of musk from Khoten was passing through the wooded valley ; and now, the spirit of Eblis is here, and she may prove a very Zuleika ! For so the Orientals name the wife of Potiphar.

'You have not deceived me?' he said suddenly to his brother ; 'and all these hints are true?'

'True as that the musical bells on the trees of Paradise are shaken by the wind of God !' replied the other, raising both hands to his forehead.

So, like many other Othellos in more civilised lands, Abdoollah pretended very fussily to go abroad—he gave out that he was going to watch one of the passes into the Khost Valley, and his train went forth under Ferozoodeen ; but he remained in secret behind, for the demon of jealousy had fully entered into him.

Unaware of the closing perils that were now at hand, Charlie Oliphant, on the evening of the following day, was seated in the long cane easy-chair before mentioned, at a window of his prison-room, for such it was, overlooking the now silent and empty court of the fort ; and he was sighing in sadness and bitterness of heart, as he rolled up a couple of cigarettes made of tobacco given to him by Abdoollah when the latter was in a better frame of mind than possessed him now. Charlie was pondering over his chances of a successful escape, and wondering when and where and how the deuce his present predicament was to end, when the curtain which covered the doorway of his room was drawn aside, and Myrah approached him softly and yet confidently, as she

knew that then Nynee was in a distant part of the buildings superintending the milking of the cattle and goats.

As usual when none other than Charlie was by, she had her veil partly withdrawn, and wore a costume made by herself—for she was her own *couturière*—of her brightest coloured silks, and all her best ornaments, with her long jetty hair plaited in the Afghan fashion into two great tresses; and really she looked, as she wished to be, strikingly handsome and picturesque, though she had blackened the inside of her eyelids with kohl, and tipped the end of her fingers scarlet with henna, so that they looked like coral.

The object of this visit was ostensibly to see if fuel was required for the sanduli, or vessel that holds it in lieu of a grate, and to bring Charlie some dried Cabul grapes in a wooden Muscovite bowl, and a little flask of yellow Derehnur wine, on which, like a well-bred man, he started from his seat to relieve her of the tray, and while murmuring his thanks, placed it on one of those little low tables used by the Orientals when taking their food cross-legged on the floor.

‘So Abdoollah has brought me here again,’ said he; ‘it is fatality!’

‘Fatality indeed!’ she replied in a low voice, while her eyebrows drooped, and by the rising and falling of her bosom, her respiration seemed to be painful.

There was a pause, during which there flashed on Oliphant’s memory a passage in Urquhart’s ‘Spirit of the East,’ when treating of Oriental women: ‘With us the women parade in gay colours, and the men in sombre; with them in both cases it is the reverse. With us, the men ogle the women; in Turkey, the women ogle the men. With us, the lady looks shy and bashful; in Turkey it is the gentleman. In Europe a lady cannot visit a gentleman; in Turkey she can. In Turkey a gentleman cannot visit a lady; in Europe he can. There the ladies wear trousers, and the gentlemen sometimes wear petticoats.’

'So Abdoollah Khan has gone again?' said Oliphant, in default of some better remark.

'Yes—to watch a pass.'

'Which pass?' asked Charlie, thinking only of localities and an escape.

'One opening towards the Khost Valley, eastward of this, and near to the Schamil river.'

Pondering over this, Charlie was silent.

'I have brought you some wine and grapes, as you see,' said Myrah, after another pause, during which her eyes spoke enough.

'I thank you for your kindness.'

'To be kind to you, a stranger, is the happiness of my life; yet I would lose it contentedly, even to die by your hand.'

'Thank heaven there is no need of such a terrible evidence of your desire to please,' said he, willing to put down to Oriental hyperbole, words the tenor of which he now knew quite well; and he began to feel that 'fierce love and faithless war' were landing him in awkward plight!

'But *you* are not kind to me,' said she, with a soft upward glance of her handsome eyes; 'and while you are so, the world, and all therein, can give me no pleasure. To me, you are as an apple of Istkahur in the land of the Guebres and Parsees—one half of which is sweet, but the other sour.'

Aware that he was expected to respond with some natural warmth to these inflated but unmistakably tender speeches, Charlie Oliphant felt the absurdity and dangers of the situation, and became blunt, dry, almost morose in tone and bearing; but she seated herself deliberately on a musnud or cushioned chair, and motioned Charlie to a place on the carpet near her feet, but he ignored this invitation.

M. Legrand has recently decided that the art of flirting is an American institution; perhaps so, but it is one the women of the Eastern world know little of. Nor could the bearing of Myrah, graceful, pretty, and alluring though it was, be classed under that head; and she did not, like a woman

of Feringhistan, understand 'how disgraceful it is deemed for a woman to be ready to fall in love,' and more than all, in love *first!*

She regarded him strangely and curiously, pique at his indifference mingling with a resolve to win and conquer him; she was inspired by passion perhaps, but certainly not love, as Oliphant understood it to be. And was it so, that the hot and passionate blood of six or seven and twenty was as ice-water to her!

She shook her champac earrings till their bells jingled; her eyes sparkled; she looked more than pretty—beautiful, and though she knew it not, made an exquisite picture of herself, that half the R.A.'s in London would have doted on, as she reclined on the musnud with a heavy curtain draped behind her. Her veil was now completely thrown aside in her abandon of manner, and could Abdoollah but have seen her then!

Perhaps some thought of this occurred to her, for she said laughingly:

'Have no fear of Abdoollah Khan; he is far out upon the mountains.'

'Would that I were so too!' said Charlie. 'Could you not, if you would befriend me, give me a horse and arms, and free me from this thralldom?'

'Yes,' she replied in a low, tremulous voice; 'but when you go, *I* must go, too. Allah destines your hand to sustain me, and to guide and protect me in all my future life. Do you agree?' she asked, with a strange mixture of timidity and command, love and growing ire.

'I will do anything, or suffer anything, for your sake; but will not abet your treachery to Abdoollah.'

A gesture of downright anger escaped her.

'Do you, or do you not, know what love is?' she asked, without even lowering her eyelashes now.

'It is for those who are free.'

'And you——'

'I am a prisoner.'

'I too have been one ; but we may both be free.'

Should he avail himself of her folly, her madness, and with it her protection and guidance to achieve an escape ? What was Abdoollah to him ? Ridicule would be his portion if he arrived in camp with an Afghan fair one *en croupe* behind him, and in fancy he heard the laughter of Crawford and others ; while if overtaken, the *sequel* was not to be thought of.

'Kiss me, in token of our bargain,' said she, entreatingly.

'Abdoollah——'

'Abdoollah is not here—thou fool ! A kiss leaves no mark even for the most jealous eye to see.'

Matters were becoming serious now, and Charlie drew back.

'Do you shrink from me thus ? are my lips baleful as the fruit of the Dead Sea ?' she continued, as anger and passion began to gleam dangerously in her dark eyes, and Charlie began to fear, as he thought of 'love to hatred turned.' But of love, though she spoke of it, Myrah had no genuine idea ; she was possessed by a strong fancy—a dangerous passion or caprice, but a most perilous one to the object of it, who became somewhat scared when she said gloomily, 'Beware lest I tell Abdoollah that *you* love me !'

Rage now began to possess her, that her advances should be treated with such unexampled coldness, and to her it seemed scorn. Her lips quivered with increasing emotion ; the veins in her delicate brow were swollen, as were those of her slender throat ; her utterance became thick and choking, and her figure, which was small, seemed to dilate and expand with the sudden gust of passion that had seized her. Yet, amid it, she glanced nervously round and shivered, as if she thought someone was behind the curtain. Was it Nynee ?—oh, if so ! Perhaps, at that moment, she scarcely cared who heard her.

But, as she thought Charlie was wavering, she was insane enough to make one more appeal.

She stretched her arms towards him. How handsome she looked then, seated on that crimson musnud, with the full flush of the setting sun streaming in upon her! Fairer than her people, her girlish cheek bloomed with a kind of olive lustre a Spanish might have envied; her small mouth quivered with all the emotions that were struggling in her heart, and her white teeth glittered under her parted lips, while her voluminous and glossy black hair, when a string of sequins that bound it gave way, rolled over her shoulders, as if to enhance the general effect.

‘Sahib,’ said she, touchingly, ‘though taken in war, and now the wife of Abdoollah, I am but his bondswoman—the spoil of his horse and spear! I can help you to escape and reach the white tents of the Feringhee-logue; but I would die if left behind! Oh, take me with you! I will be your slave! Your friends shall be my friends—your enemies, my enemies; I shall have no thought that is not yours! And if you die, I will die too! But there is great mercy in God, and love and sweetness are in store for us. We shall escape together from this gloomy place, and the death it menaces to both of us. Come with me, then, and I will love my lord for ever!’

She was rising from the musnud, when the curtain behind it parted, and an iron grasp—the hand of Abdoollah Khan—was placed upon her tender shoulder! His eyes were blazing with jealous anger, and his strong white teeth were set like those of a man striving for a few moments to hold his rage and vengeance in check.

A wail as from one of the doomed escaped her, as she slid from her musnud in a heap at his feet, and grovelled there, voiceless, like a dumb animal. In wildest terror she clung to his heavy and pitiless hand, as she had never thought of clinging to it before: she kissed it, she pressed it to her cheek, and strove with all her little strength to arrest the continuance of its deadly object; and the presence—even the existence of Charlie—seemed to be forgotten by her,

Now there ensued a horrible scene—a brutal brawl—a tragedy which, but for its picturesque and artistic accessories of placé and costume, might have happened any day in the East-end of wife-beating London, and ended perhaps in its chief actor figuring at Bow Street.

Her words, when they came, were only broken cries, and brief as broken.

Quick as lightning, the barbarian threw round her neck the loop of a silk cord with which he was provided, and dashed her on the floor, exclaiming :

‘The burning waves of hell roll over thee ! Stand back or die !’ he added, menacing Charlie with a dagger. ‘Guiltless as I know you to be, I shall spare your life ; but you shall spend it among the Tartars, and tongueless, for by every hair in the head of Mahomet, you shall never talk of the wife of Abdoollah Khan, or for what she died !’

He then placed his heavily-spurred boot upon her head, and drew the silken cord tight with one fierce, vicious, and horrible wrench. Her slender neck was broken—she was dead in an instant !

But at that same instant, Oliphant—his gentle nature roused to blindest, fiercest fury—rushed upon Abdoollah ere the latter could utter a cry or sound, and grasping his bare and muscular throat with fingers that seemed turned to iron claws, and with a terrible tenacity of clutch—a clutch for life or death—they fell prone together beside the yet warm corpse of Myrah, whose sweet little face was now a hideous swollen and discoloured mask. But Charlie was uppermost, and he dashed the head of Abdoollah again and again on the floor till he became utterly senseless, and lay motionless as if dead, with his eyes closed, and his mouth full of blood.

Panting, he drew breath, and thought his fate was sealed. To remain was to be immolated in some unthought-of and inhuman manner the moment Abdoollah recovered ; but how to escape the guarded fort, the walls of which were too high to leap from ! A hundred schemes had occurred to him

in quiet past hours, but all as vain ; and now he had not a thought but to sell his life as dearly as he could, when he snatched from the girdle of Abdoollah a brace of pistols and his khandjur, or Indian dagger, and rushed forth into the court of the fort, just as the sun went down behind the mountains, and, as usual in the East, instant darkness overspread the earth.

The lowing of cattle announced that Nynee had seen them milked, and the herd was being driven hastily forth to graze on the grassy slopes below the fort, at the arched gate of which, now open, some bustle and confusion ensued. Few armed watchers were about just then. Sitting cross-legged on a camel-hair mat, smoking his hubble-bubble or wooden pipe, with a sheepskin coat on, and a vast tulip-shaped turban, the *durwan*, or gateward of the fort, was dozing and half asleep as Charlie bounded past him like a hare, and vanished into the darkness that enveloped all the mountain solitude where the grim fort of Abdoollah stands.

Barely twenty minutes had passed, yet they seemed as an age to the flying and breathless fugitive, involving as they did the great crime of Abdoollah Khan, the fierce conflict between him and Charlie, and the unhoped-for flight and freedom of the latter—a freedom which he would have to be doubly wary how he perilled or lost again.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE ATTEMPTED ESCAPE.

THE fugitive's first and chief object was to leave as far behind as possible the fort from which he had so suddenly and unexpectedly escaped, after as dire and horrible a catastrophe as probably was ever perpetrated within its walls, though doubtless these had been the silent witnesses of many a deed of horror.

As usual in these regions, the darkness had come on densely and completely ; even the last tints of departed day had died out on the summits of the Safid Koh, and fortunately there was no moon. The great gloomy mass of the quadrangular fort had blended with the general obscurity, and as there were—save loopholes—no windows or other openings in its external walls, not a ray of life was seen to indicate its whereabouts, and not a sound indicative of pursuit came on the breeze that swept over the hilly waste ; but that some pursuit would be instituted, and sharply too, the moment his flight and Abdoollah's recovery came about, Charlie could never for a moment doubt, as he ran the panting race for life along the rough mountain slopes, every nerve quivering, and every sense stretched, slipping, scrambling, and stumbling over the dank dewy grass, like a hunted stag, yet breasting the slopes gallantly, for he was a bred mountaineer, though sadly out of training by his recent sojourn with Abdoollah Khan.

He must have proceeded some miles ere fatigue overtook him ; and coming upon a clump of trees, which proved to be of the pistachia or turpentine genus, which there grows wild, he crept in for rest and shelter, and strove to scheme out his plans for the future. He was without money or food ; but he had a good brace of double-barrelled pistols, and a sharp wavy-bladed khandjur, a dagger of very ancient form.

Panting, breathless, and bathed in perspiration, the fugitive lay there among the long grass, oblivious of snakes and of scorpions too, though in the district towards Peshawur they are appalling for their size and venom.

A human life had just been blotted out under his eyes. Lives were being lost daily in that land of war and outrage ; but this life had been taken in the quiet and solitude of a room, and not amid the din and fierce hurly-burly of mortal conflict. A passionate and wilful heart had grown cold, and would go to a grave over which not a single regret would be expressed, or a tear shed.

If wrong there had been in the acts or intentions of Myrah, it had been terribly avenged ; but, to Charlie's mind, the punishment meted out far exceeded the crime ; and for himself, Abdoollah no doubt would find some extenuating clause in his favourite Koran.

How long Charlie lingered in the pistachia tope he never precisely knew, for time seemed to stand still. He listened for sounds, but no sound ever came, save the plash of the gathered dew falling from an over-charged leaf on the grass below.

He reckoned that the distance he would be then from where the troops were *last*, would not be quite thirty miles—perhaps only twenty, but over terrible and unknown ground ; and where might they be *now*, so many weeks—even months—had elapsed since his capture !

Ignorant of that, and of the country in which—though his tattered habiliments were not particularly European now—all men's hands were against him, how could he steer for Roberts's column, or even upon its traces ? and if he failed and was retaken, what mercy could he expect from Abdoollah now ?

The last words of the latter had been that he would respect his life, and cut out his tongue and sell him to the Usbegs—the Tartars of Turkestan—(the fate which our Cabul captives in 1840 only escaped by the bravery and skill of Sir Richmond Shakespeare and his Kuzzilbashes) ; but even that amount of mercy might not be accorded to him now by the infuriated khan, after all that had taken place between them.

As hour followed hour in the dark tope, the cold became intense—oh, how bitter ! But in the excitement of the time, he thought not of it, and only remembered it fully afterwards. A chill, biting wind drove masses of vapour before it, and for a time a fog prevailed that was condensed into an impenetrable cloud, so that an object could scarcely be discerned at arm's length ; but suddenly a gleam of light began to appear

high in the sky—the upcoming sunshine, glinting on the eastern sides of the Safid Koh peaks, and this served to show the points of the compass to the wanderer.

He remembered that the unfortunate Myrah had told him that the tribe had departed to watch a pass which opened into the Khost Valley and towards the Schamil river ; consequently if he would avoid these barbarians, now led by Ferozoodeen Khan, he must avoid all the country that lay on his right, and seek some path northward, by the eastern base of the Jadran mountains, amid which the fort of Abdoollah is situated, and reach, if possible, Ali Khel, where a detachment of our troops was sure to be, in advance of the Peiwar Pass. Mighty vague all this seemed and sounded to himself, but other plans he could have none.

With the opening dawn and dispersal of the mist, there would be pursuers upon the mountains he was assured, and many of the Afghan horsemen were now furnished with field-glasses, picked up in skirmishes, among loot, or supplied by the Russians ; thus his figure might be seen from a great distance. Even already it seemed to his overstrained hearing that vague and uncertain noises, not unlike human voices, were ascending the hill-slopes from out of the morning mist, that invaded all the lower part of the hills like a sea of white-carded wool, into which their spurs abutted like miniature capes and headlands.

These sounds drew nearer as the mist passed upwards, and he shrunk close in his damp place of concealment, yet scarcely too close, when shadowy figures, advancing through and out of the mist, began to take palpable form, by fours, by dozens, by scores, and even by hundreds—Ferozoodeen, *en grande tenue*—as the whole band of the absent Abdoollah Khan defiled up the hill-side, about three-score paces from where he lurked.

So near were they, that he could recognise many of their dark, bearded faces, the details of their varied costume, and the multifarious weapons they carried.

He scarcely dared to breathe, and his heart stood still, for if even one took it into his head to ride through the little grove, Oliphant knew that he was lost, and grasped his pistols—one life at least should answer for his own.

But the horsemen were all riding leisurely, as the foot were marching, in the direction where he knew the fort must lie, to the south-westward of him then. Their fighting, if they had encountered any, was over now, or no more was anticipated just then, as they all had their long juzails slung over their backs, and all with matches extinguished ; yet they had neither loot nor plunder to protect, and when they reached the fort, or met any of those who might be scouting therefrom, they would doubtless disperse all over the hills, and search like hawks every nullah, ravine, crevice, and path, till they tracked and overtook him.

At last they disappeared over the hill-slope, and the lance-head of the latest had flashed its farewell in the morning sun ere Charlie became aware that Ferozodeen Khan was *not* among them, and that he had not seen that redoubtable personage ride past.

Could it be that some Highland or Ghoorka bullet had sent him to his long account of evil? Charlie almost breathed more freely at the idea, as he came forth and struck into a rocky bridle-path that led, he knew by the direction of the sun, north-westward.

A wild gourd and a draught of water from a stream that trickled over a rock afforded him a breakfast ; and refreshed by this hermit-like fare, he pushed hopefully yet warily on, scanning every part of the lonely landscape as he proceeded. Most solitary was the path that wound far along the mountain-side, marked only by one feature, a superb and solitary date-tree—a tree whose head languidly ‘droops,’ as an Eastern writer says, ‘like that of a handsome woman overcome with sleep.’

Steering his way by the sun amid the solitude, as he might have done a boat at sea, Oliphant began to gather hope, and

though the horror of last night's episode was keenly in his heart as yet, there was with it a certain revulsion of feeling, born from the mere fact of freedom, that he was armed, and the master of his own proper person ; yet he always looked back from time to time, in expectation of seeing a gleam of arms on the hill-side announce a pursuit, all unaware that the first danger that was to menace him would lie in front.

Yet so it was, affording him a terribly significant hint that he was *not* quite so far from the hill-fort as he imagined.

The path he had traversed for some four or five miles now began to enter a ravine, overhung by low and impending hills, from the summits of which the giant *jelgoozeh* pines shed a sombre gloom below ; and at a turn of the way he came suddenly upon two Afghans—a juzailchee, or rifleman, on foot, attending one, apparently of superior rank, on horse-back, and both, as usual, completely armed to the teeth.

The horseman drew his bridle instantly, and the other unslung his juzail ; while Charlie also paused, at the distance of about fifty yards, his heart beating most painfully, yet for a moment hoping against hope, that these stragglers might belong to some friendly tribe, or prove to be merely a cossid and tchopper, or foot and horse messengers ; the bearers perhaps of letters to the Khoorum Fort, or further still, towards Peshawur.

Vain idea !

The horseman drew his glittering tulwar, and the juzailchee proceeded in frantic haste to load his long and cumbrous matchlock, a slow and tedious process, which we have already described, and which, in this instance, Charlie cut short by a ball from one of his long iron pistols, levelled firmly over the hollow of his left arm, to make his aim doubly sure and steady.

The man fell forward on his face, with his rifle in one hand and his long wooden ramrod in the other, just as two other Afghans appeared at a distance, and to the rear.

The horseman came on with a wild shout ; Charlie fired again in the same fashion, full at his heart, but he made his

horse rear up ; the ball entered its head, the animal fell forward heavily, rolling over its rider, in whom, at that moment, for the first time, Charlie recognised Ferozodeen Khan.

Believing that he was rid of this personage, and perhaps of all further obstruction from his party, Charlie passed where he lay struggling under the fallen animal, the hoofs of which were grinding and scraping the path in the last throes of death, and fled with all the speed he could exert down the way in front, tossing away his empty pistol as a useless encumbrance.

The path descended steeply now. On he went, blindly, and breathlessly, but the sound of feet behind announced that he was pursued. Free from his horse, Ferozodeen Khan, tulwar in hand, was coming plunging down the narrow rocky way, about a hundred yards behind ; while about double that distance were other two Afghans, too evidently pursuers from the fort.

Again the rocky path, now deep down in the shady ravine, wound round an angle, and Charlie saw before him—what ?

That it ended abruptly at the very verge of a black and apparently fathomless chasm, some twenty paces wide, and was continued up the opposite cliff by a flight of natural steps ; but how these were to be reached, heaven alone seemed to know.

His heart stood still ! He drew forth his other double pistol. His opponents were but three. He examined the priming of the old flint locks, for such they were. In both instances it was *gone*—the weapon was useless !

He flung it from him, and he heard the clank of its fall, in the chasm far down below, mingle with the footsteps of his first pursuer. He drew his Afghan knife, and in the desperation of the moment he cast his eyes imploringly upward, and, as if his prayer was answered, saw a probable means of escape—of escape even yet !

CHAPTER LIV.

PERIL ON PERIL.

A BEAM crossed the chasm about thirty feet above his head, and from the exact centre of that beam there were depended two stout ropes, which were tied ('belayed') one on each side to the branch of a great straggling wild vine that grew down the sheer wall of rock. Of all the rope-bridges peculiar to the mountains of India, this was the most remarkable, as it was simply on the principle of an English miner's swing and ladder, by which to make an effective flying vault from a ledge of rock on one side, to a corresponding ledge on the other.

In less time than it takes to describe the act, Charlie had twisted round his wrists and taken in his grasp the nearest rope. No thought occurred to him as to whether it might be decayed, or the tie round the beam be loose. The time was not for thinking, but for instant acting; and with a little run, a single, deep respiration and an agile swing, he vaulted over the black, yawning profundity, and alighting safely on the other side, cast from him the rope, and rushed up the rough, natural steps in the rocks beyond, just as Ferozoodeen Khan came rushing down the narrow footway, shouting:

'Death to the Kafir—the unbelieving white-faced beast!' fired by the infinity of wrongs which he believed he had to avenge.

A bitter malediction escaped him on seeing that his intended victim had crossed safely. But the latter had unwisely omitted to secure on his own side the rope by which he had been enabled to vault over, and, as it swung loosely back again, it was deftly caught by the ready and practised hand of his Afghan pursuer.

Ascending on the opposite side, slowly and deliberately, but breathlessly, Charlie Oliphant paused a moment or two and looked back.

Ferozodeen hurriedly, but carefully, made more secure the bundle of pistols and daggers in his shawl-girdle, and patting them, with grim significance, addressed his powers of agility to the task before him.

'*Mashalla!*' ('In the name of God!') he shouted, and swung himself off; but, in his fierce excitement and thirst for blood, having omitted to take a little run and give himself sufficient impetus, he *failed* to reach the other side, and a wild shriek of mortal terror escaped him as he swung back again, and his feet not meeting the ledge there either, he swayed to and fro over the terrible chasm, helplessly, and beyond the reach of all succour.

His two followers now came rushing down the rocks. They had their long juzails and unwieldy forks or rests; but on beholding the terrible and unexpected peril of Ferozodeen Khan, they forgot all about the fugitive—and forgot even to fire a shot at him, as he lingered in some bewilderment, but certainly without much sympathy, on the opposite side.

After watching for a minute or so, in blank consternation, the khan swinging there slowly like a huge pendulum, the oscillation of which gradually ceased, till he hung silent, still and nearly motionless, save what his heavy respiration caused, in the very centre of the gulf, they called out something to him, as if of encouragement, apparently, and then rushed away to procure some aid with poles or ropes, as Charlie supposed, though it was equally probable that they might have abandoned him, in sheer dismay, to his terrible fate.

The remains of two human beings were discernible amid the shadowy obscurity of the chasm, at the bottom of which a mountain runnel trickled. One was a skeleton, bleached, bare and white, its bones scattered about as the jackals and vultures had torn and left them; the other, a victim of some months ago, lay half sunk amid the sandy ooze and water, partially devoured and partially decayed, but still more horrible to look upon; and a terrible shudder convulsed the

form of the miserable wretch who swung sheer above them, there by his agonised wrists and fast relaxing hands.

Would he, too, lie there until he became first as the one and then as the other?

'*Staferillah!*' ('God forbid!')

A couple of vultures circled slowly round him, and then perched themselves on the beam overhead, where they eyed him with their heads on one side, flapped their dusky wings, and croaked complacently. The hair at his temples bristled up, and his eyes had a wild, a terrified glare in them.

From a fissure in the rocks a jackal peered forth, and he could see its black, fox-like nose, covered with ashy-grey hair, and its stealthy, gleaming eyes; and then he closed his own with the despairing expression of a man who would look no more!

Utterly incapable of assisting the miserable creature, even if he felt inclined, Charlie gazed on this scene with a species of horrible fascination.

Beneath Ferozodeen was the abyss, a hundred feet and more. No word escaped him, but he began to groan heavily, and writhe his limbs upward; the rope swayed, and once—but once only—his feet feebly touched the granite wall, but only scratched thereon, without obtaining the slightest footing, and he swung out over the black profundity again.

As he did so the heaviest of his long iron pistols dropped from his girdle and clashed upon the stony bed of the rill below, making his whole frame vibrate with horror. With unsparing hand this man had meted out cruel deaths to many, and felt now that his own time was coming—that Paradise with its houris and couches of pearl, or hell with its torments, its garments of fire, where the evil ones shall have 'boiling water poured on their bare heads, and also on their skins, and shall be beaten with maces of hot iron,' were terribly close at hand!

His loongee had fallen off; perspiration bedewed his shaven head and his pallid, livid face; he panted as if his

breast-bone would burst ; blood began to start from the points of his fingers, for too well he knew that when they could grasp no more, all would be over. Grim terror chilled his once ferocious soul.

He felt that if the Prophet would but place his feet on the shelf of rock he had missed, he would remain there happy till the end of his days—till the unseen hour of fate that was written on his forehead came—and that every hour of his life, were it a hundred years, would be dedicated to religion and to prayer.

Vain wish ! An awful silence prevailed ; even the trickle of the fetid water, where the dead lay far down below, was unheard, and no sounds were there but his heavy respiration and the croak of the vultures overhead.

Little by little his hands were relaxing ; neither they nor his upstretched arms could bear his body much longer.

At last the rope swung there alone—the man was gone ! Yet Charlie seemed scarcely to have seen his white and agonised face vanish, for to his over-strained vision the spectrum of it seemed to have come again.

No sound followed his fall ; but the two vultures spread out their wings, and began to circle slowly downward into the chasm, as Charlie turned, and with an emotion of sickness and dismay in his soul, pursued his doubtful path among the hills.

As he pushed on, taking what he conceived must be the direction of Ali Khel, he almost forgot about what might—nay, must have ensued, if Ferozodeen Khan and his two followers—well armed as the trio were—had achieved the passage of the chasm, and overtaken him, single-handed, and armed only with an Afghan knife, upon the road.

Sedulously avoiding any path that might seem to lead to a village, and thus adding much to the toil and delay of his progress, oppressed too with anxious doubts of how even that day might end, he was insensible of much of the desolate grandeur of the scenery around him, and the ‘many picturesque bits,’ as an artist would have called them, that

ever and anon opened on either hand. The only living creatures he saw from time to time were Afghan shepherds and the flocks of fat-tailed doombas afar off on the hills, and these, of course, he sedulously avoided ; at last he overtook on the way a man whose aspect and bearing led him to infer that he was too old to fear, and from whom he might obtain some information, though he was evidently not a native of the country.

He proved to be an aged Byragee or religious mendicant, who on Charlie's approach saluted him profoundly in Brahminical fashion, uttering some words that were to him unintelligible, and might have been secret maledictions instead of benisons, as Charlie had not an anna—not even an Afghan cowrie-shell to bestow upon him.

He was a tall and emaciated man, whose gaunt form and aged limbs were besmeared with ghee and ashes. A cummerbund, once red, was wound round his loins. Under a sheepskin that covered his shoulders could be seen at times a number of beads of various sorts hung round his neck. His matted locks, of no distinct colour, clotted with ghee and dust, hung like the mane of an old lion about his shoulders ; his hollow eyes glittered like those of a rattlesnake, yet were not devoid of a certain restless intelligence. In his hand he bore a walking-staff, headed like a short spear, and was in all his aspect and bearing precisely one of those religious enthusiasts or fakirs that are to be met with in all parts of India, and who are often men of cunning and worldly selfishness and indulgence, combined with heavy and unearthly penances.

As he was not an Afghan, Charlie was at once encouraged to ask him concerning the nearest camp or post of the British troops—could the padre sahib tell him this, for the love of heaven—alms he had none to bestow.

Twelve *coss* from where they stood—or twenty-four English miles—would bring him to the Feringhee camp at or near the Koobee Khotal in the Khost Valley.

Twenty-four miles—Charlie's heart half sunk at this information. In this present worn and famished condition, how would he ever be able to achieve that distance, and over such terrible ground too!

Could the padre sahib indicate the exact locality of the Koobee Khotal?

He showed him two mountain-peaks of similar shape, a greater and a lesser—the latter the nearest—and said that if he pursued his present direction, keeping those two in a line, twelve *coss* would assuredly bring him to the tents of the Feringhee-logue.

Deep irrigation channels, water-courses, streams, ravines—every species of barrier peculiar to the country—even another rope bridge—armed watchers and prowlers, might be between him and this pass occupied by our troops in the Khost Valley; yet Charlie had nothing for it save to thank his informant, who might, for all he knew, have innocently or wilfully misled him, and resume his weary way, leaving behind him the fakir, though the latter offered to be his guide so far as an ancient Hindoo Mut'h, or temple, which he knew to be about two *coss* distant.

So this was the vast area of the Khost Valley that opened away to the eastward on his right, watered by the Schamil and its many tributaries, flowing away towards Banu.

The sun was verging near the western mountain ranges now, and ere long the shadows of the mighty Jadran peaks would be cast along the valleys to the eastward; but all the scenery was brilliant with the approach of evening. Rays of crimson and gold stretched far across the sky, edging with these bright tints the masses of fleecy clouds that overhung the two mountain peaks by which the wanderer was to steer his way.

Pink and rose colour tinged the snow-clad peaks and slopes of the greater ridges, whose sides were rounded off into shadow by purple and neutral tints, and deepened into blue and black.

Charlie pushed on bravely, anxious that nightfall should find him as near the outposts as possible, and thought :

‘ Be the day weary, or be the day long,
At length it ringeth to evensong.’

But, alas ! there were neither Christian bell nor evensong among these heathen mountains !

‘ The temple—the Mut’h !’—he exclaimed, as he suddenly came upon it, and thereby became aware that he had accomplished four miles of his journey.

It was a little edifice of peculiar form and antique aspect. The chunam which had once covered its walls had fallen off in masses, exposing the bricks of which it was constructed, tinted with all the hues imparted by age, the weather and decay.

The roof, or dome, was rent in more places than one, by a wild vine that grew luxuriantly among the clefts its growth had made, but now held together by the tenacity of its roots like long and silvery fibres. Some giant poplar trees grew near it, and a tamarind contrasting with them in its light feathery foliage.

No village was near, and unless some such community had been swept away by the Mussulmans, it was difficult to account for such a fane being in such a place.

As Charlie drew near it, a horse, saddled and accoutred, stood near the horseshoe-shaped entrance ; and reared against the wall stood a juzail with its match extinguished. He paused for a moment, irresolute whether to proceed and perhaps be overtaken by the rider of this animal, or to conceal himself among the poplars till he departed. Through one of the openings, or windows, he peeped quietly and carefully in, expecting to see a devotee of some kind engaged at prayer before some old tomb or long-abandoned shrine—for the place was a veritable ruin.

Instead of such a personage, he saw an Afghan warrior, one of the hostile Ghilzie tribe, richly clad, with all the usual

arms in his girdle and a tulwar by his side, stretched on the floor, overpowered apparently with fatigue, and fast asleep, with his head resting on the umbo of his round buffalo-hide shield; and on seeing this, Charlie's resolution was taken in an instant.

He took the bridle of the horse from a grotesquely carved stone knob over which it had been thrown, and leaped into the high demi-pique saddle; but the animal kicked, plunged wildly, and seemed reluctant to move, till he pricked its flanks with his Afghan knife, when it bounded lightly and fleetly away, his hand guiding it towards the two peaks indicated by the Byragee, while the sun had begun to sink out of sight behind the Jadrans, just as a tiny segment of the moon rose clear and sharp in the direction of the Koobee Khotal, and the air of the valley became soft and sweet with the perfume of the early and sudden night.

Darkness had fallen, but the fugitive had still the moon for his guide.

CHAPTER LV.

'DEARER THAN THE BRIDE!'

No letter or tidings came from Duncan Daljarroch, nor had aught been heard of him since the telegram in the newspapers announced that he had been landed at Port Said past recovery, and in agony with his wound. Mrs. Daljarroch received no answers to many letters, and a great dread began to oppress her and Augusta that he had succumbed to his sufferings, and they should see him no more.

'But do you think, mother,' Lady Augusta would say, ever and anon, 'that if—if he should return, he will receive me with forgiveness, and love me as he used to do at Abercairnie?'

'Doubt it not, child. I am sure he will—for I know my Duncan !'

But Mrs. Daljarroch also knew that, though the affection of her son was still within Augusta's reach, if he still lived, especially with such a hostage as the babe that lay in her bosom—a little more of her past bearing might have put it out of her power perhaps for ever.

Week, however, followed week, and in these our days of swift communication and rapid locomotion, the silence was very perplexing ; and still greater it grew with alarm, when Mrs. Daljarroch's last missive was returned to her through the Dead-letter Office from Port Said.

'Gone—gone! perhaps—nay, certainly!' said Augusta. 'O my God, mother! he is no doubt dead by this time—or he may die and we not know it—and it is I who have killed him !'

'You, darling?'

'Fever of spirit has aggravated the effects of his wound—poor soul! He will lie in a distant grave, and I not with him. I who sent him from me with words of cruel despite—that I hated him—hated him !'

Mrs. Daljarroch's tears fell slowly and heavily as the girl-wife spoke, while her heart grew heavy at the thought of her two sons, who in infancy had clung to her bosom and clambered on her knee, and who from being frank, joyous and brave schoolboys had grown to handsome manhood under her eyes, finding their graves so far apart, with half a world between them.

'Would I were strong enough to travel to the Red Sea ere it be too late, mother—too late!' Augusta would say ; 'for if Duncan die, I shall believe I murdered him !'

'For heaven's sake, and your own, and for the sake of the bairn that lies in its cradle, do not say so!' Mrs. Daljarroch would urge piteously.

Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett applied to the Horse Guards, and received a blue sheet of foolscap with a vast

margin, and three brief lines to state that 'Nothing was known of Captain Daljarroch beyond what the public prints contained.'

It was a soft spring evening when this gloomy epistle arrived, and Augusta, now as completely changed in spirit and disposition as if she had almost become another person, cast herself on her knees beside the bed in which her baby lay, and felt bitterly the grief and disappointment that its father's eyes might never rest upon its face ; and she poured forth the prayer of a humble and contrite heart, for strength to uphold her and faith to guide her, blended with supplications for Duncan's life and safety.

When she arose, her troubled but beautiful face was calm and serene, though her long dark lashes were matted with tears ; and she felt in her heart the trust and hope which, if the world does not give, it cannot take away.

The sun was setting, and the evening hour was always dear to her. She threw open the window, and resting her throbbing head against the sash, looked out. Though half the city lay northward between her and the shores of the Forth, there were calm and stillness there. The birds were singing good-night in the spacious gardens, where the dying breeze stirred the pale-green leaves and bursting buds of spring ; and far away in distance the azure Forth with all its isles, and the lovely shore of Fife with all its wooded slopes and swelling hills, was bathed in the glory of the setting sun.

The sun set—its rays faded out on spire, and tower, and terrace ; the twilight began to deepen ; the wonderfully melodious cry of the oyster-women began to ring out on the still air, and so closed in an evening that Augusta was fated never to forget.

She was wont to retire to bed betimes. Fleurette brought lights, and undoing her mistress's magnificent dark hair, began to arrange it for the night, while Augusta, sunk in profound thought, sat in an easy-chair before her cheval

mirror, by mere force of habit, for her eyes were chiefly fixed on the tiny and contented occupant of the white-laced berceaunette by her side, while her little slippered feet rested on a velvet tabourette, and a rich pink cashmere robe, trimmed with point lace, enhanced a tender beauty there was none but Fleurette to see.

Suddenly there came a ring at the door-bell, which was one of those resounding bells peculiar to Edinburgh, that nearly made Fleurette, as she started, swallow three long-legged hairpins which she held in her mouth.

Wheels were heard at the kerb, and voices in the entrance-hall.

'O mon Dieu, madame!' exclaimed the soubrette, starting from her side; 'on a reçu des nouvelles importantes!'

Ere Augusta could turn, the reflected figure of a man appeared in the tall mirror before her—a man pale and propped upon a staff, regarding her earnestly—Duncan Daljarroch; and in a moment his arms were round her, and her weeping face was hidden in his breast.

When again she looked at him, she saw that his handsome and well-cut features had lost all the glow and rounded outline they had once possessed, and that though his dark eyes were bright and eager, his cheek had the pallor of marble, and his whole face had the aspect of a man who, in his very prime and strength, had suffered much mentally and bodily, while his crisped hair, and even his thick dark moustache, were already seamed with grey hairs.

'Not dead, but alive, and safe and sound!' exclaimed Mrs. Daljarroch, enfolding him in her plump arms; 'my boy—my bairn—my Duncan!'

'Not dead, certainly, dearest mother—worth two dead men yet,' said Duncan, cheerily, and in the intervals between the kisses she rained on him, and with a voice somewhat broken, and eyes that were moist, 'though old Marrowbone and the rest of the medical staff gave me over; but one cleverer than all—a lady—cured me—or nearly so.'

'A lady! God bless her!'

'So say I, mother,' said Duncan, laughing.

'But who?'

'Dame Nature, with health, strength, and the good blood I inherited from you—you old darling!'

'And my auld Duncan.'

'True, mother, true.'

'And your wound?' asked Augusta, in a very broken voice.

'Is healing——'

'The ball?'

'Dropped out at Port Said, and I shall soon be well and whole. But, hurrah! here is Duncan *tertius!*' he exclaimed, as his mother lifted up the berceaunette in which the baby was sleeping—fair, soft, and looking like 'a rose-bud lying on new-fallen snow.'

Duncan felt his honest heart full, nigh to bursting at that moment of joy, for which his dear mother's last letter, received at Gibraltar, had scarcely prepared him, but of which his dream, on the night before the Peiwar Khotal Pass was stormed, seemed to be the foreshadowing.

He kissed baby's soft face as tenderly as if he feared it might fall to pieces, and as he laughingly took from a pocket-book and hung round its fat little neck the V.C. he had won, there swelled up in his soul an emotion more glorious than had ever thrilled it when he heard the long roll on the drum or the war-note of the pipe :

'Whose breath may lead to death,
But never to retreating, boys!'

'So, mother, you will now have two Duncans to nurse and coddle—an old and a young one!' said Daljarroch; 'and as for the evil impostor who wrought so much mischief, I might have deemed him such, for why should our Willie, however wild he had been, have shrunk from meeting us?'

In the face of Augusta there was an infinite tenderness now—an almost wild expression of love, of fear and remorse, as she gazed upon his wasted features, while he hung over

her, murmuring fond caressing words that were—he knew not what—but, if rather incoherent, they flowed unbidden from his heart and lips.

‘Can you forgive me for the past, dearest—dearest Duncan?’ said Augusta, piteously.

‘We have done with the past,’ said he, looking down on her fondly; ‘let us think only of the blissful future that lies before us—before you, our little one, and me.’

Yet she was not satisfied, and again and again he had to tell her how he had loved and worshipped her, and had grieved—oh, so deeply and bitterly—for her cold indifference to him, in all the many months of their separation, amid all the toil and danger he had undergone—on the hot, breathless marches in Upper India, amid the savage passes and deep snows of Afghanistan, and amid all his sufferings in the Khoorum Fort, and the long, long homeward journey down-country.

‘I am so grateful to you, Duncan, now,’ said she, with her face nestling in his neck.

‘Oh, Augusta, I seek not gratitude——’

‘What then?’

‘Love—only real love.’

‘You have all the love of my heart, Duncan!’

‘God bless you, my darling, for saying so.’

And the once strong man, now enfeebled by suffering, and overcome by many emotions, wept as he caressed her.

‘And your poor friend Oliphant,’ said she, after a pause; ‘that handsome, joyous boy, for he was little more——’

‘Yes, poor Charlie! his life has been lost, like too many others, in that wanton and atrocious war of which we cannot foresee the ultimate close. How that brave lad loved your sister Auriel! But it is all over and done with now.’

‘Done with indeed,’ murmured Augusta, as she thought of Auriel’s marriage.

‘God rest poor Oliphant!’ said Duncan; ‘from the day he left the Khoorum, he was never seen or heard of again.’

Augusta could see that notwithstanding all Duncan had undergone, he had lost nothing, but had rather gained more of that manly dignity which had certainly won her admiration, if it had failed—with his great worth and many loving qualities—to win her love. His expression was temporarily changed, as it is with the eyes of all who have been fiercely and wolfishly face to face with death and suffering ; but still it was tinged with sadness, but a sadness fast blending into joy.

'Oh, say it again to me once more !' she whispered.

'What, darling?'

'That you love me,' said she, with a glance of entreaty and infinite tenderness of tone, 'and forgive me.'

'Fondly I do, Augusta. I have now learned "How much the wife is dearer than the bride!" Thus I love you, perhaps not with the passion you formerly saw, but with a deep and enduring regard, tempered by suffering and some adversity, and strengthened by a knowledge of all your excellence and real goodness of heart. Again and again let us forget the past, Augusta. We cannot undo all that ; but the future—oh my love !—is in our own hands. Here, with you leaning on my breast, I find a solace for all the worst evils that war or toil or sorrow wrought me.'

Augusta looked up at him, and her head was no longer bent ; her eyes met his with something of her old pride in them, but full of pathetic tenderness, earnestness, and a love that would endure.

'Oh, my own Duncan !' she exclaimed, in a tone of self-abnegation that my Lord Abercairnie would have deemed 'deucid bad form' in *his* daughter, had he heard her, 'I do not know by what right or merit I have inspired and won a love so pure and unselfish as yours !'

Daljarroch pressed her silently to his breast.

All the anxieties, the varied and stinging suspicions, the doubts and heavy sorrow of the past, had vanished at one swoop, and the real peacemaker—the real good fairy who

had brought it all to pass—lay fast asleep in his tiny crib, knowing nothing at all about it.

All gloom was past now ; a new life was beginning for them, and a flood of joy was flowing in tumult through the souls of both.

In all the British Isles perhaps there was no happier man than good, worthy Duncan Daljarroch ; and who can say that he did not deserve to be so ?

CHAPTER LVI.

AT MATOOND.

'A WHITE-FACED son of a thief ! One of the Feringhee-
logue ! Deen ! deen ! may their graves be defiled !' such
were the shouts that greeted Charlie Oliphant, while many a
drawn tulwar flashed around him in the morning sunshine,
and the glittering point of a long lance menaced his throat.

The mists of early dawn were gradually dispersing on the
southern slopes of the snow-capped mountains that over-
hung the Khost Valley, when Charlie, who had ridden slowly
and carefully, that no mistake might befall him now (halting
for hours in topes when the moon and stars became obscured
—sleeping there, by snatching a dreamy standing doze with
his head resting on the pommel of his saddle, while grasping
the stirrup-leathers, and then remounting, had been con-
fidently proceeding towards the hill-peak, that he supposed
must be close to the Koobee Khotal), suddenly found him-
self to be in the heart of an armed horde, among whom he
had ridden.

Resistance seemed madness ; he was unarmed, worn, and
well-nigh careless now what befell him. The hand of Destiny
seemed against him, and he could but stoop to it, and gain
as speedy a death as possible ; and to this he had come.

when he thought he should have found his comrades and freedom !

‘ Deen ! deen ! (Faith ! faith !) Death to him !’

‘ Stay all your hands ! By God and the Prophet, I’ll be the death of the first who touches him !’ cried a horseman who seemed the leader, dashing forward between Charlie and those who would have assailed him, and who proved eventually to be the Naib, Akram Khan, the leader of a friendly band co-operating—perforce, apparently—with our troops in the valley, yet not indisposed to gratify their natural bloodthirstiness by the slaughter, of a stranger whose position placed him at their mercy, and whose skin was fairer than their own.

Charlie now began to breathe more freely, till suddenly one fellow, who was armed with a long lance and wore a vast scarlet turban, exclaimed, using the while the favourite Eastern word expressive of the Latin ‘ *Dii avertite omen* :’

‘ Mashallah ! the kaffir rides the horse of the Sirdir Hyat Disrail Khan !’

‘ Where got you this horse, sahib ?’ asked Akram Khan, a grim warrior bearded to the eyes, and whose hook-nose and Jewish aspect might have made him pass for ‘ a lineal descendant of the impenitent thief.’

‘ On the highway—some coss from here,’ said Charlie, feeling that the situation had suddenly become unpleasant again.

‘ Is his blood upon your hands ?’ asked Akram, his dark eyes glittering under their bushy snow-white brows.

‘ No ; I have no weapons. But of whom do you speak ?’

‘ The brother of our master, Akram Khan—the Sirdir Disrail Khan,’ said the lancer and several others, as if seeking an excuse for mischief. And perhaps the matter might have had a tragic end, had our troops not been so close at hand ; for the sirdir, whose nag Charlie had ‘ borrowed,’ was actually the brother of our ally, but a mutineer and traitor, who was afterwards killed by a 72nd Highlander in the Bala Hissar, when Roberts avenged the death of Cavagnari by its

capture, and the execution of the kotwal, or mayor, and others in the blood-stained city.

The band of Akram now got into motion, and it consisted of a remarkable set of tatterdemalions. In one thing only were they alike—turbans and rags ; and they were armed with an infinite variety of [weapons, some of which seemed to be of considerable antiquity ; and all had several belts, from which hung iron flasks or horns for powder, bags for wadding, bullets, and slugs, little wooden cases for cartridges or charges, like ancient collars of bandoliers ; the inevitable long rusty juzail with its match and fork, a round shield, and cummerbund, into which were wedged a wonderful number of pistols, knives, and poniards of all sorts and sizes.

Charlie kept near Akram Khan, but was quite in the dark as to what was to be done, or what might follow next ; he could only gather that the British troops were about to attack the Mongols. The general looked to the Naib for procuring the peaceful surrender of the garrison of the Durani Fort of Matoond. Where *were* the troops though ?

Could Charlie but have heard a British drum !

The morning air was fresh and crisp in the sunshine, but frost lay still in the shadowy places. The track pursued by Akram Khan was stony, rocky, and jungly, up a gentle ascent, which Charlie, from an incidental remark, learned to be the Koobee Khotal, the place mentioned by the wandering Byragee.

After a time the track dipped down to a little river, flowing through a valley, beyond which could be seen the green Waziri hills, that overlook Banu (or Edmondesbad), all steeped in the golden glow of the morning. This valley was studded with villages, the little edifices of which stood distinctly out from amid groves of fruit-trees—many of these the cherry, introduced by Baber himself from India.

The plain from which the valley opened was broad and yellow in tint, with dark groves of poplars and shilgar-planes, that made a combination of the picturesque ; but all of which

Charlie thought he would rather have avoided had he been alone and totally unprotected.

Suddenly a British trumpet rang out upon the air, and from an intervening thicket a staff-officer—a general—escorted by a party of our 10th Hussars (wearing pith helmets in lieu of Busbies) and of the 5th Punjaub Cavalry, came galloping up. How Charlie's heart bounded at the sight!

Every vein tingled; life and liberty again were his. He was a free man, 'the lord of his own proper person' once more; and he felt that he would rather die a hundred times than endure the loss of that freedom again, or undergo events that were to haunt him as nightmares in the nights that were to come.

He cantered forward to the astonished cavalry group, raised his right hand in salute, made himself known in a few words, and in as few words was heartily congratulated by the general and officers of the escort upon his escape from the enemy; but to Charlie it seemed as if all that had been so acutely and terribly momentous to him, was but a small matter to them, as he was only a unit in the great game of finding 'the scientific frontier,' a game from which he had been somewhat apart of late, though playing his own desperate stakes for death or life.

No time was there then to listen even to the smallest details.

'Your regiment lies over *there*, in camp,' said the general, indicating a point of the landscape with his field-glass; 'but meanwhile you may as well wait with us the surrender of the fort ere we return.'

Charlie bowed, and reined back his horse a little way. His singular costume (of his uniform nothing remained but a tattered pair of Stuart tartan trews): a sheepskin coat, and a now dirty white loongee—the work of the miserable Myrah's little hands—with a high red peak, together with a long beard, though of rich brown hair, making him look

much more like one of Akram Khan's tatterdemalions than one of her Majesty's Albany Highlanders. All this excited neither surprise nor comment. So far up-country, our people had got pretty well used to all manner of picturesque squalor and tatters; but an officer of the hussars, seeing how feeble and wan he looked, gave him a pull at a brandy-flask from his holsters, and a cigar, which he received most gratefully, and but for which his strength might have given way; while the general now addressed himself to Akram Khan, desiring him to lead the way to the fort of Matoond, which they speedily approached.

It stands on the plain mentioned, surrounded by trees. Like that of Abdoollah Khan, it is a quadrangle, with a tower at each corner, and one rising from the centre of each of the four faces, or curtain walls. All these eight towers were crowded with men, whose arms were seen glistening on them in the sunlight, and even the ramparts between were crammed with human faces.

'You have no sword, I see,' said the friendly hussar to Charlie; 'a pity—you may perhaps require one. Yet we do not attack this place with horse alone, as you may suppose.'

The general halted at the distance of a quarter of a mile, and examined the place closely through his glass, and sent the hussar with an order to Akram Khan, who had halted his band a little way off. The latter gave some instructions to one of his people—he of the lance and scarlet turban, who had recognised the sirdir's horse—and he galloped forward to the fort.

It was evident that no fight was to be made; the multitudes vanished from tower and wall, and as the enormous gate, studded with huge nails, was flung open, they issued peacefully forth from a dark yawning archway, and lined each side of the road, to which the general's party advanced at a walk, through a horrible stony mullah, washed, worn, and rent by the rain-torrents of ages,

These wild-looking fellows who lined the way were all armed with ponderous juzails, which, had they used them, might have emptied every saddle in the general's escort ; and they were accompanied by the bearers of green standards, which they lowered, and drummers who made a fearful din on their calf-skin drums, as the general rode into the fort—a miserable place, notwithstanding its picturesque aspect, full of dirty hovels in the interior, and reminding Charlie very unpleasantly of his late quarters on the slope of the Jadran mountains.

While the general and his staff questioned the governor of the fort, as to whether the Ameer had ever sent him supplies of cannon or powder to oppose the British troops, and was replied to by all manner of falsehoods and evasions suited to the emergency, brass trays were produced covered with cashmere shawls, tiny cups, and a brass Russian kettle, from which boiling bright green tea was poured.

Into each cup a lump of sugar—which might be poison—was dropped, by the red-turbaned lancer ; but of this beverage none would partake, upon various excuses and pleas, till old Akram Khan was seen partaking freely of 'the cup that cheers but not inebriates,' sitting cross-legged on a grey camel's-hair Persian carpet, like Ali Baba surrounded by the Forty Thieves.

None had now any fears of the beverage extolled by Cowper in his 'Task ;' and even the hussar whispered in Charlie's ear, that 'the green tea wasn't so devilish bad after all.'

The voices of women, and much tittering, announced the vicinity of Akram's zenana.

A hookah for the general and pipes for all were about to be introduced ; but the former (amid a *chamade* from the Afghan drums) rose to return to camp, to which he was escorted by Akram Khan, and a select party of his ragamuffins ; Charlie thanked heaven in his heart that the little expedition to capture the Durani Fort had thrown him more

speedily under the protection of our troops. And that night saw him once again in the tents of the Albany Highlanders!

CHAPTER LVII.

IN THE KHOST VALLEY.

FREE! Charlie was free now, and he hoped that the troubles and shadows of the past time would fall behind him for ever.

His unkempt hair and big brown beard amused the regiment; but there was a hunted and haggard expression in his eyes that showed how much he had suffered, faced, and overcome, as the officers and men crowded round him, receiving him as one returned from the dead, and much of that hearty shaking of hands which is a Scottish characteristic ensued.

'Charlie—Charlie, old fellow!' exclaimed Cosmo Crawford, who was at his wit's end to be of service, and in the exuberance of his spirits; 'I always said you would be mighty hard to kill!' But he did not add that all hope had died out in his breast long ago. 'We must get you other togs in lieu of these—they *are* "coloured clothes," by Jove!' added Cosmo, as soldiers call every costume, even fustian, thus, in contradistinction to their own uniform; 'you can't turn out in this rig. I've a spare Highland jacket; the quartermaster will find a helmet; the rest is soon got. And now for something to eat—tiffin, dinner, and supper moulded into one, and so not the less welcome. Now, Archie,' he cried, turning to his servant, 'I hope our mess, whatever it is, is quite *comme il faut*?'

'No, your honour—it's curried lamb, biscuit, and a bit of cheese,' replied Archy, saluting.

'All right—serve up!'

And the repast, a species of scramble, in which several

officers joined, contributing each their quota of grub, grog, and hilarity, began without ceremony, and with a strange variety of utensils and accessories. All were seated jovially (like hundreds of similar groups on the grass) before the door of Crawford's tent, while the golden light of a glorious sunset fell on the white canvas habitations of the column, and turned to ruddy bronze the giant boles of the aged and gnarled pines that grew thereby; and Charlie had to give a brief narrative of all that had befallen him, and to undergo some pungent quizzing on the subject of the khan's wife, which, considering all the risk she had caused him, and her own terrible end, made him—well, just a trifle angry.

'As Bailie Jarvie says,' cried one, while imbibing his brandy-pawnee out of a coffee-cup, and to change the subject, 'we can't have all the comforts of the Salt Market here, *en route* to Cabul; but I must confess to being sybarite enough to miss my easy-chair in the corner of the smoking-room, the last periodicals, the evening paper, the billiard-room with a quiet stroke at pool, and a good glass of wine after the last post has blown.'

'We have one satisfaction here, anyhow,' said another.

'Indeed!' exclaimed Cosmo.

'Yes.'

'How, old fellow?'

'As Kingsley's ballad has it:

"One comfort is, one can't be worse off *there*"—

in the other place, which is hot as Kamptee.'

'Precisely. But is it true that the Mongols have been heard of in the Koobee Pass, over there?'

'True,' replied Crawford, producing a store of cigars. 'A Bungash *tchopper* employed by General Roberts came into camp an hour ago, and reported that he had been fired at by them in the pass. His horse was killed under him, and he was robbed of everything but his life, which they spared because he was a Bungash Pathan.'

'So near, then. We shall have warm work on the morrow,' was the general remark.

If Charlie's narrative of personal peril and suffering proved a matter of interest on one hand, he had to hear much of the operations of the army and the Highlanders on the other, and heard with some amusement of the terrible excitement and consternation caused in camp on the morning of the 1st of January, when the pipes, after a carouse to 'the Land o' Cakes and the Auld Folk at Hame,' marched through the streets of tents, playing the New Year in, and thereby causing every man to rush to arms—the cavalry to their saddles, and the artillery to trace to and limber-up—in the belief that the Afghans were upon them; and one of the musicians on that occasion was Crawford, who was an excellent amateur piper, and had often been wont to play while the children danced in the regimental school at home, or in little *fêtes* given to them by Daljarroch, which added greatly to the young officer's popularity with the men of the corps.

The first night of Oliphant's return to camp was one of continual alarms. The head-men of the surrounding villages, whose submission General Roberts awaited, had not come in. By seven in the evening signal-fires on every mountain peak around the Khost Valley were blazing luridly in the misty moonlight, tipping with fire the bayonets of the sentinels. Ever and anon a blue light, portending none knew what, shot high in air; and this would be replied to from another point of the valley by a succession of red, rapid flashes, such as might be produced by handfuls of loose powder thrown upon a flame.

From all that could be gathered, it was evident that a mighty multitude of armed warriors, inspired by undying hate and rancour against us as the invaders of their country, were mustering fast among the hills that overhung the Khost Valley, surrounding the column, and replying to each other by a code of secret signals known to themselves alone.

On the other hand, Roberts was ready. Rifle-pits were dug at all the vulnerable points of the valley, and men lodged

in them; cannon were posted to cover the flanks, and no man thought of going to bed. So passed the slow hours of an anxious night—every man with his rifle beside him, every officer with sword and revolver for a pillow.

And Charlie was back to the old life again, and had fallen into all its ways as if he had never been out of them; and all his late adventures seemed a hideous dream—a nightmare, never to be forgotten.

Back to the old familiar *rôle* again—the daily duties and the nightly watches, the uniform, the pipe, the bugle, and the drum. But many a face was absent now—gone for ever; among others, those of Chieslie certainly, and of Daljarroch too probably. Yet his heart beat lightly, though the war-beacons were blazing on the hills; while the ease and freedom of the camp, nathless hard fare, hard work and peril enough at hand, seemed joy, idleness, and luxury compared with the odious thraldom he had endured in the hands of the wild men of the Afghan hills.

So night passed away; the beacons died out; the morning came quickly in, and the drums and pipes of the Highlanders welcomed it with the sweet, low, old Scottish *reveille*, which sounds so opposite to the air so often used by English regiments at the same time, and which is familiarly known as ‘Old Daddy Longlegs, who wouldn’t say his prayers,’ or something very like it.

And now, as he sat at breakfast over some boiled rice with butter, green chillies, eggs, chupattees, and coffee, with Crawford in his tent, an overland-trunk improvised as a table, and a couple of big stones for seats, he learned for the first time some news from Europe—*i.e.*, home.

The last that had been heard of Daljarroch was his having been left dying at Port Said, for it was naturally supposed that it was all over with poor Duncan. Gillis McBane would get his company—there would be a step in the regiment, and that was an end of it. Poor Duncan! they would never see his like again.

'And poor little Auriel!' said Charlie, in a low purring kind of voice; 'what she must have suffered in thinking me dead—drowned!'

Crawford coughed—a green chilli had gone the wrong way perhaps, or a fragment thereof.

'She will know the truth soon, however.'

'But too late, I fear, Charlie—too late!' said Crawford, who was now in all Charlie's confidence, and really looked distressed.

'Too late!' exclaimed Oliphant, looking up; 'do you mean that she is—she is ill—or——'

'Dead? oh, not at all.'

'What then?' asked Charlie, relinquishing his knife and fork.

'On the point of marriage with another—that's all—that's all; but I am very sorry for you, old fellow, sorry indeed! Where's the infernal paper? Oh, here; read for yourself. It is a month old, and has gone round every tent in the corps, for papers are precious here; yet I use it as a table-cloth at times.'

The paragraph was soon found, and though the words of it went like a knife to the reader's heart, they informed the public, in terms prosaic enough, that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place between Lady Auriel Menteith, youngest daughter of the Right Honourable the Earl of Abercairnie, and Sir John Lennell, Bart. of Lennell, M.P. for Muddle-Puddleborough.

Charlie read the paragraph twice, and lest he might be tempted to read it a third time, tore it into minute fragments, and scattered them on the turf floor of the tent.

'What do you think of it?' asked Crawford, after a pause, and pushing his cigar-case towards Charlie.

'I think it is a wretched newspaper canard!' replied the latter, with a sickly smile, however.

'For your sake I hope so, old fellow; but earl's daughters are deuced high game for a sub to fly at. And I remember

that when we were quartered at Peshawur, I think it was just such a sentence in the same paper that preceded the marriage of Daljarroch to her sister, and I remember, too, poor Chieslie and I having a jolly deep drink over it.'

Charlie bit his lips.

'Is it long since you saw her? long since you have heard of or written to her?' asked Crawford, after another pause.

'Man alive! don't you know that we are interdicted—that I cannot write to her nor she to me?'

'All the worse—deuced awkward—it looks like——'

'Like what?'

'Excuse me—out of sight, out of mind—a vulgar saw, but a true one often. She may have changed her mind—women always do, they say. An aunt cut me out of her will because I snored in church. Lady Auriel has taken another fancy—this fellow Lennell to wit.'

'Don't torture me, Cosmo,' said Charlie, in real agony of spirit, though he strove to thrust doubt from him—doubt of her.

'Then you see, you are supposed to be drowned—have been so for ever so long. All the papers were full of little regretful paragraphs; we never knew half your merits or virtues till then, Charlie. The melancholy event was fully ventilated, and under that idea she may have pledged herself to another. High-born grief is above the comprehension of low-born mortals.'

'But so soon, Cosmo—so very soon! You don't know Auriel Menteith.'

Crawford began to smoke in silence, as if he deemed all he might say were useless; but neither knew the pressure that had been put upon the poor girl they spoke of, though Charlie had already experienced to the full 'how coldly the wind sometimes blows off the *glaciers* of Mayfair.'

'It is said,' remarked Cosmo, who after an oppressive pause felt himself compelled to say something, 'that no man is ever jilted without returning thanks to heaven for it in time to come.'

Charlie scarcely doubted Auriel, but his old dread of the earl remained in its fullest force ; yet there was an anger in his breast, as he said :

‘ Cosmo, I would have waited for her as long as ever Jacob did for Rachel. I would have faced anything—done everything, to be more worthy of her, and make her love me more—and now, now !’

His voice broke a little, and Crawford looked horribly worried. He would rather have heard Charlie swear than take the matter thus.

Amid all the latter had recently undergone, he had ever but one thought to sustain him : that he would have the joy of rehearsing it all one day to Auriel. Now, if this report were true, they could never meet in this world again.

Other officers came into the tent, to Cosmo’s relief, and Charlie had to learn one of those lessons which society gives its scholars, to wear a quiet and unmoved air, to listen and reply with a smile, while the heart is swollen to bursting, and the fox beneath the cloak preys upon the vitals ; so he replied merrily to all the new-comers had to say of the alarms of the past night, and ‘ the shindy ’ that was brewing to-day, for the morning had been inaugurated by musketry and slaughter.

Some camel-men had gone into a village near the camp to purchase boosa for their animals, and had been barbarously slain, and their bodies hacked to pieces in a shocking manner ; then the 5th Punjaub Cavalry, under Williams, had ridden out to avenge them, but were hard pressed, while the enemy now began to gather on the hill-tops in thousands and in two great masses, one bearing a red standard and the other a white one.

The whole column was now under arms. The 10th Hussars, under Major Bulkley, had galloped out to reinforce the Punjaubees, and found the Afghans posted strongly behind rocks from whence they opened a juzail fire, but quickly gave way, retiring up the slopes when some of our hussars dismounted, unslung their carbines and began to

pick them off by a sharp, accurate, and pestilent skirmishing fire at from five hundred to eight hundred yards, till the ground became so broken that further pursuit by cavalry was impossible.

The regiment was in column now, and began its advance to the front ; the pipes were playing its old familiar quick-step, 'The Bonnets of Blue ;' the sun gleamed on the sloped rifles and bayonets as the companies broke into fours and wheeled off from the right, and the yellow colours were waving in the wind. But Charlie Oliphant seemed scarcely the same man that had lain down to sleep in Crawford's tent last night ; much of the old passionate, national and regimental ardour had gone out of him, and all he felt inclined to live for now was the intoxication of headlong and reckless peril !

CHAPTER LVIII.

A FIGHT WITH THE MONGOLS.

LUCKILY for himself, Charlie had scarcely time given him to think about aught but his duty, and take his place in the ranks with Cosmo's off-hand advice in his ears :

' Finish your cigar, old fellow—join your company,—thank God you've got one to lead, and don't revile or inveigh all the universe because a girl has thrown you over.'

The position of the British was now menaced by Mongols, Kostwals, Wazaris and Mirza Khels (the latter under Abdoollah Khan) in unknown thousands, who covered all the slopes and clustered on the rocks of the valley, with their picturesque garments floating in the wind, while they brandished their charahs, blazed away with their juzails and loaded the air with yells, their various war-cries, menacing chiefly the general's right front.

Over night the foe had been gathering, in obedience to the

fiery signals, in vast hordes in the villages on the *right* and in the *rear*, and a considerable portion made a great show with banners displayed, towards the left flank in order to draw attention there, while a vigorous assault was made from the other two points ; and thereupon ensued a cavalry and infantry fight, to which the artillery added their efforts, but which is very difficult to describe otherwise than as a series of attacks upon a number of villages.

General Barry Drew—a veteran of the 94th—was left to protect the camp, with No. 1 Mountain Battery of guns, the 21st Punjaubees, and the Albany Highlanders, who remained for a time, like greyhounds straining in the leash, while a terrible musketry-fire rolled over all the valley into which the rest of the column was penetrating, driving the enemy's masses uphill, while the second Mountain Battery sent shell after shell among them with terrible effect.

A great white standard, borne by a sacred moollah, was seen floating from rock to rock in retreat, till its bearer fell, when it was seized by another, and borne onward and upward to a ridge which the enemy finally lined in that quarter.

Every time a cannon flashed, the dark heads were seen to duck behind the natural rampart, till the shell fell and burst, when up they sprang, to yell, dance, and fire long rifles, till the next flash made every head vanish again, but on the nearer advance of the troops, they broke and fled *en masse* to more distant hills.

Elsewhere the troops were hard at work, pouring a terrible shower of shot and shell into the villages on the west side of the camp, filling every hollow with fire and smoke, and waking the echoes of the vast mountains with a thousand reverberations ; and now the Albany Highlanders were called into play.

Fifty of them, under a major, marched to the north front of the camp to prevent an onslaught in that quarter ; while the rest of the battalion, led by the colonel, left the camp altogether to attack whatever they might meet.

Charlie's company formed a portion of the Highlanders who were now sent to reinforce Barry Drew, and he moved it forward in skirmishing order, to *feel* the enemy; his well-trained soldiers avoiding all unnecessary exposure, as they ran or crept from one point of cover to another; the front-rank men keeping the direction, and the rear-rank men regulating intervals as steadily as at a field-day in Stirling Park, till the time might come when the hottest fire could be poured in, and the final assault in a compact body be made by Drew's force in masses.

After two hours' desultory skirmishing in the open, the enemy retired into the villages on the west of the camp, panic-stricken by the shells of the mountain battery, and the pot-shots taken at them by the Highlanders as they fled; but the Chowney, or cantonments of the Khost garrison, as it was named, had been occupied at an early hour of the morning by a resolute fellow, riding a fine white horse at the head of many hundreds, who opened a roaring fire of juzails on the troops, but at ranges that rendered it futile when opposed to our breechloaders.

Two guns now opened on the fort, or works, and after a time the courage of its occupants gave way, and evacuating the place, they fled in masses wildly across the country to the right, hotly pursued, till they took shelter in a group of villages named Mohammed Khel, where again they manned the boundary walls of each.

Again the Highlanders and a portion of the 21st Native Infantry, led by Captain Carruthers, advanced in skirmishing order, till close up, the independent file-firing being steadily maintained; till again the enemy suddenly came swarming out of Mohammed Khel, and made a rush over the fields to cross a river, by which they hoped to reach the shelter of the Wazari Hills.

As they suddenly burst out, making the welkin ring with yells and war-cries, and our bugles sounded 'to close,' or bring in the extended line, the solitary horseman, who led

them here, came suddenly swerving round out of the route pursued by the fugitives, towards the closing line of Charlie's skirmishers, some of whom fired at him, as they ran towards their centre, but missed, so great was the speed of his horse and so uncertain its movements, as he seemed for the time to have lost command over it; then it was seen that his bridle arm was broken, and in another moment Charlie recognised, with his floating loongee and sheepskin mantle, Abdoollah Khan. He was splendidly mounted, and among the caparisons of his horse were six large flying tassels, of long white hair, made from the tails of wild oxen, adding greatly to the picturesqueness of his aspect, as he came careering forward, with a round shield on his useless left arm, which a bullet had shattered, and a tulwar in his right hand.

'Spare that fellow; he is wounded—take him prisoner!' cried Charlie, with his sword striking up the cocked and levelled rifles of two or three of his men.

Closer and closer he came. Whether he recognised Charlie or not, it is impossible to say. His lips were pale—they were blue. His eyes were blazing with the mad rage and hate that rioted within him. He grasped his sword with a deadly clutch. His dark visage was unnaturally white, and every nerve and vein were thrilling, like his heart, with the desire to slay as many as possible ere he was himself slain.

'Down with him!' cried an officer; 'the fellow is as mad as if he were running a muck!'

He was close to the Highlanders now, almost within a lance-length, when one, quick as lightning, put a cartridge into his rifle, slapped to the breech-block, fired, and shot him through the head. Abdoollah Khan fell back on the crupper of his horse, which wheeled wildly round, and galloped away with the corpse still in the saddle towards the fugitives, who were all in full flight towards the river.

So ended the career of Abdoollah Khan.

It was at that time that some thirty sowars of the 5th Punjab Cavalry made a furious charge upon his flying followers.

For a few minutes they vanished from Charlie's sight, as there was a depression in the ground in front, but in another moment they were seen in the heart of the fugitives.

High in air flashed the sword-blades as each man rose in his stirrups and stooped to his work, cutting them down *sabre à la main*, on every hand. One trooper broke his sword over the head of a Mongol, as he clove it. He then sprang from his saddle, armed himself with the dead man's khandjur, and with it continued the work of slaughter with his comrades, till the ground became too soft for their horses; and then they drew bridle, while the fugitives poured like a living tide across the river, and found shelter among the hills occupied by the Turi Khel and other wild clans, and then the general plunder of the abandoned villages began, and enormous quantities of grain and cattle were secured; but only ninety prisoners were taken.

By six in the evening the fighting was over, and no sign of the foe remained, but the dead and wounded scattered over all the country, and the blazing villages that shed a wondrous effect of lurid light and dark shadow upon the mountain-slopes.

Strong pickets were posted everywhere, as there was a chance, perhaps, of a night attack.

The prisoners were placed under a small guard (on the outskirts of the camp), the command of which was given to Charlie, and he and Crawford, ere the latter returned to his tent prior to taking command of a picket, congratulated each other on the fact, that though many a bullet and slug had grazed them, neither had been hit during all the varied operations of the long day; but when to the reaction which followed the excitement of it, was added the gloomy home news or rumour Charlie had heard, he became so low in spirit that he almost envied the numerous dead who were lying in all directions with their pale faces upturned in the moonlight.

The night after the fight with the Mongols was one of rare

beauty. In a sky of the deepest blue, flecked with snow-white floating clouds, the moon shone in all her silvery glory on the broad plain or plateau, in the valley where the Khost villages were blazing. Ever and anon a roof fell in, and a pyramid of sparks rose high in air. Near him was the huge black outline of a commissariat elephant, with a pile of herbage, leaves, and roots before it to masticate, with its turbaned mahout and keeper sitting close by, smoking probably hemp-seed, in wooden hubble-bubbles.

The hour and the scene were calm and beautiful, though the flames were suggestive of rapine; but the night was fated not to pass without some terrible tragedies.

Smoking a cigar, Charlie was resting himself upon a charpoy, or native bed, composed of a network of ropes, stretched on a wooden-frame brought from the nearest village among other loot. He was lost in thought; his mind was far away from the flames now fading out among the villages, the dead and wounded that lay around them, and from the strange group of prisoners whom it was his duty to watch.

The latter were arranged in three rows, each of which were fastened by one rope that was passed round the body of every man, and secured at each end to a strong stake fixed deep in the earth. The orders of the general were to keep them strictly guarded, that it might be known in the morning who were Mongols, who Khostwals, and who were Mirzan Khels.

With bayonets fixed and rifles loaded, the sentinels walked to and fro in silence at their posts, and in sullen and taciturn Oriental silence, too, the prisoners remained, squatted on their hams, but eyeing their captors from time to time, with furtive glances full of hate and malignity.

Suddenly a couple of random shots were heard at a distance, and the prisoners, conceiving it to be a signal for attempting to escape, uttered a wild shout, and as one man sprang to their feet! Charlie leaped from his resting-place

and unsheathed his sword, but more by force of habit than with any intention of using it.

'Guard, fall in!' he cried, and got his little party under arms, while the sentinels brought their bayonets to the charge, yet irresolute what to do against these unarmed men, who commenced wildly and furiously swaying from side to side with the double hope of breaking the ropes which bound them, or by their united strength uptearing their fastenings from the earth. Their cries and excitement produced a general alarm, and a number of armed Sepoys came rushing up on every hand.

'Deen! deen! Allah raz-olsun!' ('Faith! faith! Praise be to God!'), were now the shouts of the prisoners, who, manacled though they were, contrived to close with some of the Sepoys, and strove to wrest away their rifles, and hence ensued a strange series of desperate hand-to-hand encounters.

One powerful Mongol got clear of the rope, but was bayoneted as he was taking to flight, and another was pistolled by a native officer the moment he was free.

The situation was a desperate one; the blood of the Sepoys was up now, and this great mass of men were swaying heavily, with all their strength and might from side to side, shouting, groaning, reviling, and wrenching in wild heaves to uproot the stakes to which the cords were bound; just as they were on the point of achieving this, and ere Charlie and other officers who were now upon the spot could prevent what ensued, the Punjaubees opened a fire upon them, and shot down or bayoneted every man who resisted. This sudden and dreadful retribution had the immediate effect of silencing and awing the survivors.

The slain, the dying, and the desperately wounded were still all bound together, and heaped up in one ghastly and confused mass. 'The dead could not be told from the quick,' wrote an eye-witness, 'except when some suffering wretch, sitting in a pool of his own blood, and looking ghastly in the moonlight, groaned beseechingly for help. I

shall never forget the appearance of the swart face of one of these wounded men. He wore a blue turban, a long blue shirt, and a dirty white pyjamas. He was young, and was leaning back on a dead body. As I passed, he turned his face full in the light of the moon. His jet hair had fallen from beneath his turban, and formed a weird frame round his features, which were haggard with agony. In his own language he addressed me, and his tones were low and pitiful. I did not know what he was saying, but it was as easy to see that he was asking for relief as if he had appealed to me in the dear name of God. He had been bayoneted in the chest.'

By Oliphant's emphatic orders, as officer of the guard, the Punjaubees, cooler now, undid the ropes, separated the dead from the living, and proceeded to tear up turbans and cummerbunds to bind the wounds of the bleeding. With his own hands poor Charlie was assisting in this work of mercy, and was in the act of kneeling over one unfortunate creature and applying his water-bottle to his lips, when a new and altogether unforeseen catastrophe befell him.

During the struggle a stray bullet had wounded the commissariat elephant, which the unusual noise had further alarmed; breaking away from the mahout and others, it came furiously along at a lumbering trot, making the very ground shake. Charlie and the wounded man over whom he was stooping were directly in its way. It made a rush at the former; a shout, an exclamation of terror and dismay burst from all, as the infuriated animal seized him up in his trunk and dashed him with violence to the ground.

'To your bayonets, men—to your bayonets!' cried an officer, 'and bear back this infernal brute!'

Too late came the order, if to execute it were practicable at all.

The elephant made a furious thrust with his tusks, and taking up the body of Charlie, who was quite senseless now, and from whom no groan or cry had escaped, he hurried it

among a crowd of camp-followers, who were too much alarmed to lend the least assistance, but took at once to flight.

And there lay Charlie Oliphant, to all appearance dead, and certainly frightfully mutilated.

When his startled and sorrowing comrades heard of this sudden and most dire catastrophe, they all said, with one voice, that he had better have perished among the Afghans in Abdoollah's fort, or in yesterday's strife, than have survived to end his career by such a fate as this; and used though they were to human suffering in every form, and to the daily sight of bloodshed and death, the Albany Highlanders, as the morning sun came in, gathered in sombre and sympathetic groups near the hospital-tent, into which he had been borne, to hear the dictum of the staff-surgeon.

CHAPTER LIX.

RICE AND SLIPPERS.

THE same morning sun that looked down on the vast and beautiful expanse of the Khost Valley and its ruined villages, the pile of dead prisoners and dying wretches in the British camp; on the white hospital-tent wherein Charlie Oliphant lay, scarcely conscious of existence, and close by it the odious elephant, quietly munching at a heap of boosa, as if nothing had happened; on Cosmo Crawford and others, loitering near, talking in a low voice of the great catastrophes of the night—the same sun, we say, witnessed all the preparations for the marriage of Auriel.

The Earl of Abercairnie, who had never been known to give sixpence towards any Scottish object, and voted a Burns festival 'behind the age,' had the preceding day presided at the unveiling of a memorial statue of the Lady Godiva, at Muddle-Puddleborough, and was in the act of looking for

his own string of platitudes, which he deemed a speech, in the morning papers, when his eyes fell on a Reuter's telegram with 'news from Afghanistan'—for news travels like light nowadays—on which he suddenly ordered the butler to take all the papers into the library and keep them there.

Something was interesting in them which the earl did not wish Lady Auriel to see ; not perhaps that it mattered much now, when this was her very marriage morning ; but his lordship muttered to himself, more than once :

'The devil ! that fellow alive again—alive after all !'

We have no desire to linger long over or detail much of this part of an often-told tale, with its blessings and bride-cake. The jeweller in Bond Street, the dresser in Regent Street, had both been busy ; ditto Messrs. Thirlage and Wadsett, W.S., and Sir John Lennell's agents ; consultations had been held and settlements signed, 'and all the prosaic details which attend Love, in these days of matter of fact and the almighty dollar,' were adjusted, to the satisfaction of everyone but the bride, who felt all the girl's weakness under the high-pressure put by family and friends upon her own indifference to the future.

'Oh, my life is a hard one—a very hard one !' wailed the girl on her marriage morning, though none could have thought so, surrounded as she was by every brilliant accessory that rank and wealth could procure her ; and she pressed her forehead and interlaced hands upon the marble mantel-piece and wept bitterly—yea, as any poor little needle-woman or ironer in a garret. But she made a gallant effort, and was perfectly calm when Sir John saw her for a few minutes before an early breakfast.

'And so Lady Augusta is not to be with us ?' said he, holding her hands caressingly, and not knowing very well what to say, as her manner somewhat chilled him.

'No ; Augusta is so occupied by her returned husband—and her baby. Besides, Augusta has altered greatly of late, in many ways,' said Auriel.

‘Marriage often changes people——’

‘And often not for the better,’ interrupted Auriel.

‘Do not say so, darling,’ said he, imploringly ; ‘it must, at least, add to their happiness.’

Auriel made no reply, though Sir John looked at her sweet face anxiously, as if he wished she would say something ; but that something remained unsaid, and she withdrew to her room, with a sigh of intense weariness, to commit herself to the hands of artistes and modistes ; while Sir John left the earl’s house for the last time as a bachelor.

‘Charlie — Charlie Edward Oliphant !’ murmured Auriel, as she thought, for the last time. She liked to repeat the name to herself, and to make apparently tender and musical words of it. Then another heavy sigh escaped the girl’s soft white bosom, and her tears fell silently.

Contention had wearied Auriel — the dropping of water on the stone had worn out the stone at last, and she had learned to the full how ‘the martyrdom of endurance is worse than the martyrdom of action.’ She had yielded because Charlie’s supposed death had left her nothing more to live for, and consented, as the earl said again and again, to end the absurdity of a school-girl’s romance—a fancy that degraded her !

We need scarcely repeat that the Afghan War was a subject of horror now to Auriel, and made her shudder. There had been but one feature in it ever before her—Charlie Oliphant. She avoided now to look at aught concerning it in the public prints ; thus, even the news of Charlie’s return to his regiment—his resurrection, as it were—would have remained unknown to her, as her friends in ‘society’ in general knew not that the Lady Auriel Menteith was interested in Lieutenant Charles Edward Oliphant, any more than in Lieutenants Brown or Robinson. Hence, she knew nothing now of his real fate, while her *own* was hurried on fast. But even had she been aware of his temporary safety, she could not have arrested that fate now, though the knowledge of it might have made the coming ceremony more distasteful.

She had, for a very little time, striven to gather some crumbs of comfort from the knowledge that engagements were sometimes broken off; but even this hope had died away, and she drifted helplessly with the tide of events.

Little Ochertyre, low down on the fourth form at Eton, and good only at keeping a wicket, approved highly of the alliance in all points; for the present it gave him 'a jolly holiday,' and in the future he saw Lennell in various capacities: he could have 'a good shy' at his preserves, a famous mount whenever he wanted it, and 'no end of pocket-money—more than he could screw out of the governor, any way.'

Though a quiet, it was to be a gay marriage. Sir John Lennell, liberal to excess, had been most lavish in the magnificence of his gifts to Auriel, and gave her *corbeille* fit for a queen, with noble and uniform presents to the twelve bridesmaids. But, quiet though the marriage, the church was, of course, nearly filled with those stray women that, as everyone knows, scent a wedding from afar, and though they have no concern therewith, crowd to it as to a suttee or a festival.

Sidney St. John, of course, was there, for he was soldiering at Hounslow, and varying that arduous work by losing glove-bets at Ascot, airing his hack in the Row, shooting pigeons at Wormwood Scrubs, and so forth—pleasanter tasks then cutting a passage to Cabul or hunting Cetewayo.

The earl's friend McCringer of that ilk and his family were conspicuous by their absence. The ex-M.P. had brought his political, anti-national, and commercial pigs to an awkward market; and after for years quoting Bible-texts, putting his name to all printed charity-lists, going to church, or kirk rather, as regularly as the beadle, having noisy 'family worship' nightly, and so forth, he had become involved in some gigantic muddle or swindle, and bolted with all the neat surplus that was not settled on his wife.

The marriage passed off well; though Mrs. Daljarroch wept quietly, and the old nurse MacAlpin copiously and vehemently, while the bride, composed and pale as death,

repeated the words of the service in a scarcely audible voice.

There were many ladies present of high and ancient title and mediocre intellect, looking as bored as they could be ; there were younger ones full of languid excitement, if we may use the term, expectant of their own turn at St. George's, Hanover Square. And Sir John came down the altar steps and forth at the doorway, his face radiant with joy and noble in its pride as he looked down on the bowed head with its exquisite veil, more exquisite wealth of golden hair, its bridal garland, which, as old Leland saith, 'betokeneth gladness and the dignity of wedlock ;' but strove in vain to see the face that, somehow, avoided his ardent gaze. Auriel was, no doubt, not his first love, as she was that of the ill-fated Charlie. 'A man's later loves are sure to be widely distinct in style from his earlier. In his youth he only asks for what charms his eyes and senses ; in manhood—if he be a man of intellect at all—he will go further, and require intellect for his mind and response for his heart.'

Sir John Lennell had not 'the latter—as yet ; but all said there was something of holy beauty in the marble-white face of the bride.

'I trust she will learn to love me in time,' he had said despondingly to the earl.

'Of course—of course ; but in marriage, as some one says, a *grande* passion is a positive inconvenience. My dear fellow, what would you have ?'

While loving and admiring Auriel with all his heart, worthy Sir John was vain of having a Menteith for his bride. To be of the Abercairnie family was tantamount to a crown charter and warrant, 'vouching not only for birth, but for beauty and manner, and all the advantages external and internal, that are assured, like gout, to be transmitted from one generation to another through blood.'

Auriel was handed into the carriage to hide her tear-blistered face under her veil, or in Sir John's bosom, poor

man ! while it bowled back to Mayfair, and the two powdered, white-wanded, six-foot 'Jeameses,' with marriage bouquets, swayed to and fro at the back of the vehicle in all the splendour of the Menteith livery ; and ere long plenty of rice and old satin slippers followed the departing wheels of 'the happy couple.'

There was a breakfast to grandees, dinners to tenants and rifle volunteers at Abercairnie and Lennell, a ball for the labourers and much playing of bagpipes, while the bells of Lennell Kirk tolled without cessation for eight-and-forty hours, and the *Morning Post* was in raptures about the bride, and ditto the *Court Journal*.

CHAPTER LX.

THE HOSPITAL TENT.

'WILL he pull through this, doctor?' asked Cosmo Crawford, with a visage nearly as white as his pith helmet, and sinking his voice at the door of the temporary hospital, for his heart was full of genuine anxiety for his friend.

'That depends,' began paunchy little Dr. Marrowbone, and then paused.

'On what?'

'Many contingencies—but it is a deuced bad case. He is still nearly insensible ; the breathing slow and laborious—pupils contracted—pulse so small as scarcely to be felt. Left side of chest appears to be beaten in,' continued Marrowbone, in that curiously unctuous way in which more than one disciple of Esculapius is apt to indulge, if giving a detailed diagnosis of a case, thus literally 'piling up the agony' to the uninitiated ; and Crawford's kind heart sank lower and lower as he proceeded : 'Extremities cold, fifth and sixth ribs broken over the region of the heart, action of *that* organ heaving up and tumultuous—'

‘No wonder, after such a devil of a spill!’ said a young assistant surgeon, whose shirt-sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and who was carrying an ivory-handled saw in his teeth. ‘Two ribs fractured below the axilla, and a serious wound from that brute’s tusks in the dorsal region.’

‘My God!’ exclaimed Crawford: ‘poor Charlie!’

‘Ah! you may well say “poor Charlie;” he couldn’t well be brought lower. Look here, Sergeant Macquinsy,’ he exclaimed to a passing hospital official, ‘see that Mr. Oliphant gets instantly the draught noted here with *Sp. ammon. arom.* and an opiate; then we’ll have bandages for the chest and hot applications.’

A multitude of other mysterious orders followed, from which Crawford rather seemed to gather that Charlie was a doomed man; and to him, as to the patient himself, when consciousness did return, it seemed hard indeed that he was too probably fated to have no glorious death in the field—no falling in a great battle with the roar of musketry, the cheers of victory, and the war-pipe pealing in his ear; to have no end that would go down in history, or even in a brief despatch of the day; but one that came of a miserable accident—a horrible catastrophe such as might befall any juggler or mountebank in a menagerie.

Though it might have been his own fate, had a bullet struck him down yesterday, to be lying where his friend now lay, it filled Cosmo Crawford with great pity to see him there amid such surroundings, for he could not be moved to his tent as yet; moreover, the movements of the column were incessant.

Many of the wounded, and of those since dead, from the recent conflict, and the more recent catastrophe of the prisoners, were lying there amid pools of blood, black and noisome, with flies battening in it, and others were swarming over the yet warm bodies of men and crowding into their open wounds.

The blood from these, and even from amputation, made the

floor slippery as that of a slaughter-house, and the wounded lay on pallets, or gathered straw, some with features full of grotesque hideousness from the tortures they underwent, some shrieking in delirium, others craving water or uttering unconnected prayers in English or Afghani. Some of those who uttered the latter were quietly pious and pathetic in their appeals to God or the Prophet ; others glared at their attendants with insane ferocity, and watched the blood of their unbound wounds flowing warm among the straw. But enough of this !

By Charlie's side lay a dead man—a Highlander—who had been partially stripped by the dressers ; but a little gold locket with initial letters and a date, some years before, decipherable thereon, was hanging at his neck. Cosmo, in the hope that this old token of some dead or distant love might be left untouched by the burial party, carefully folded the dead soldier's tattered jersey over it, and he was borne away to the pits with the relic concealed.

For weeks Charlie Oliphant lay on a charpoy there, unable to move hand or foot, nearly unconscious of all around him, and that he was watched by Cosmo as if the latter had been his twin-brother. His brow was ever knit with pain or the pressure of unpleasant dreams, even when his eyes were wide open, without sense or thought, and he muttered strangely and wildly of the links that bound him still to life, to reason, and the world.

'Come on, the reserves—come on !' he would cry at times. 'Where are the pipers?—strike up! Support the fighting line—close in, men—in—in—and now for the final rush, boys—hurrah !'

It was chiefly at night he had dreams of life and action, and then his brain would reel, his body felt a mass of wounds, and the blue starry sky seen through the door of the hospital mosque seemed to become crimson as blood.

But softer visions came to him, as reason resumed its sway, and the newspaper paragraph began to haunt him

while tossing on his charpoy ; the farewell words of Auriel came to him, ever and anon, like a voice from beyond the grave, and wrung tears from his closed eyes, for he was weak as a little child now, and he was heard to mutter :

‘ And even for one hour, Auriel, you never forgot me—thanks, darling ! But the paper said—oh, it is false, you say !—a canard—a pure invention ; but what misery it has cost us !’

‘ He had heard,’ he muttered, ‘ of women who had gone to their husbands’ arms with their hearts aching, longing and yearning for others. But she was not one of these !’

So her voice, her smile, her whole person seemed to come to him in the dreams of the night, when those we have lost and wept for seem to live again.

‘ This is well—he will recover now !’ said old Dr. Marrowbone, complacently ; ‘ sound sleep will come anon, and the bandages can be renewed with relief. Macquinsy, give him an ounce of wine with his sago. I say, Crawford, who is the woman—girl, I suppose—whose name he mutters in his sleep ?’

Crawford felt he had no right to say, and so replied :

Well, I scarcely know—some one in Scotland, I fancy.’

‘ Of whom he is very fond. Gad ! I wish she was here, for after a while she would be his best tonic !’

And Crawford thought so too. And Duncan Daljarroch, now fast recovering health and strength in his native land, heard of all this from Cosmo ; his heart grew very sad as he thought of Charlie’s early promise, of his sunny boyhood, his enthusiastic career as a subaltern, the blighted romance of his first love, and his too probable death amid the horror and suffering that surrounded him, or amid the toil of the journey home.

Auriel was married, too ; hard and fast as Church and Law could bind her—placed beyond his reach, further than Charlie then knew or conceived ; but all was not over between them yet.

He began to recover, very slowly ; but his days of service and glory were over, and there were doubts if he would survive the long journey homeward that Daljarroch had traversed, for the season was beginning to be one of intense heat ; yet in process of time he began to move slowly about the camp, complaining of nothing but intense weakness ; he was young, fresh, and hardy, and the now healed fractured bones gave him no trouble.

That he too probably would have to quit the service, wherein all his desires and ardent wishes lay, relinquishing the hopes long cherished for years, with all the pomp and circumstance of war, and that generous and jovial good-fellowship—that comraderie which exists nowhere else—cut him to the very soul.

Thus it was with intense sadness that he bade adieu to the Albany Highlanders, shook for the last time the hearty hands of Crawford and others, as they began the march westward, in search of 'the scientific frontier,' and to replace the British colours on the Bala Hissar, while he was going home, a pale, wan, and to all appearance a heart-broken convalescent.

At Khoorum and in the Khost Valley, the weather was frightfully sultry now—the heat seemed to be cracking the earth and splitting the very trees.

Peace with Yacoob Khan had been signed on the 26th of May, but the promised 'frontier' was as far off yet as the mirage of the desert.

Great was the misery Charlie endured on the homeward journey, together with the troops he accompanied. These were the 10th Hussars, *en route* to recross the Indus at Attock.

The heat was dreadful ; in many a sad village so great was the drought that the bucket brought up no water from the well, the grain-bags were empty, and the cattle dying. The west wind had lost its last vestige of coolness, and hour by hour it increased in its sirocco-like power, scathing and blasting

everything. The birds and the leaves dropped together from the date, the palm, and the baubul trees. A fierce sun flamed in the sky all day ; at noon none dared venture abroad. The dogs lay gasping in the shadow, and the vultures sat by the white wayside skeleton with their black beaks agape ; the egret and the crow gasped by the dried-up water-tank, and the hardy coot abandoned her eggs amid the withered sedge, where a lake once lay or a stream had flowed.

Smitten down by cholera, or sun-stroke, the Hussars marched on with many an empty saddle. The sufferings of the cholera patients were dreadful and heart-rending ; and Charlie, as he rode on, unable to be of the least assistance, heard them in their agony imploring their comrades to shoot them with their carbines and end their misery, while their truly noble colonel was toiling among the patients, many of whom died kissing and clasping his hands to the last.

And so, on and on, the hurried march continued in the sultry atmosphere, while the beasts of the jungle sought the village tanks and pools in vain for water, and found thereby only the dried bones of a dog or buffalo.

At last Charlie bade adieu to the Hussars, for rumours came of fresh work cut out for them in Afghanistan, and they were to join the Peshawar Valley Field Force, and from Lahore he continued his homeward way by rail. The temperature was still suffocating ; cambric seemed a heavy garment, and iced water alone made life tolerable ; and by the time Charlie saw the mighty ghauts and temples of Benares, where he was to take the rail south-westward for Bombay, he had a serious bout of illness.

People attributed this to the heat and all he had undergone. But Charlie knew better. English papers and periodicals of all kinds had now fallen daily in his way, and by that time he knew *all* that was to be known.

* * * * *

passion of tears which it was quite as well worthy Sir John Lennell did not see.

She longed with all her soul to see Charlie Oliphant once again, were it but for a minute ; and yet, with all her soul too, she hoped he would *not* come.

All next day she remained at home, however ; and Charlie, unable to resist the mighty temptation given by the simple but unwise advice of the thoughtless St. John—though what good would come of the meeting it were vain to surmise—sent up his card, though Duncan Daljarroch, who, like a kind, good soul, had come all the way from Scotland to Southampton to meet him, had strenuously warned him against the visit ; for Duncan, with his new married life, his newborn happiness, felt a great and brotherly pity for the brave and honest-hearted young fellow, whose life, like his heart and hopes, had been wrecked.

It has been wisely said, that it is one of the most touching things in human nature, as it is ' a commonplace of psychology, that when a man has just lost hope or confidence in one love he is then more eager to find and lean upon another.' But it was not so with Charlie Oliphant.

Many things had, long ere he came home, warned him that this would be the end of his love-dream, and now, why was it so bitter and keen, when he had expected it ?

Sir John Lennell was absent. Auriel was alone in her sanctum, a charming little room, all blue silk, lace, and silver, when Charlie was ushered into the drawing-room, and she remained for a few minutes striving to calm excitement.

Months had passed—many bitter months, he thought, and he and she were now within a few yards of each other, yet further apart than when he lay in the fort of Abdoollah Khan, or chained to a sick bed in the camp at the Khost Valley.

The day had gone past when he would—as he had done—crush to his lips the scented blossom her hand had touched, or the bud from her bouquet ; and yet he madly loved her still. Tantalus like, the once longed-for moment of meeting

her had come, and yet she must elude his grasp. Yearningly he uttered her name—the name that had been in his heart and on his lips in dreams by night and dangers by day, and he was wont to recall her sweet song of ‘The broken font of tears she thought was dry.’

The font indeed was broken now.

As one in a dream he looked around him. The room was a magnificent one, with a great conservatory occupying one side of it ; the hangings were of pale blue silk, bordered with silver ; there were vast mirrors, in the depths of which every object was reproduced *ad infinitum* ; sofas, couches, flowers of rarest beauty ; nothing was wanting there in the way of statuary, painting, and the finest art, and with that peculiarity of the mind which makes it in moments of dread or pain note veriest trifles, Charlie found himself watching the butterflies flitting about in the conservatory, and the gnats whirling in their play amid the flood of amber light that streamed downward on the brilliant flowers and leaves.

‘Charlie—Mr. Oliphant!’

She stood before him in all her beauty, and held out her hand, which he merely touched ; but there were too many tears in her voice—if we may use the expression again—for her to say more just then ; and Charlie, as he gazed upon her, felt all the mad rashness of having trusted himself in her presence. Weak in health, his nature was unable to affect the stoicism he thought to engraft upon it, and when he heard her low exclamation, in which gladness so strangely mingled with sorrow, and saw her parted lips and the faint rose flush dying on her cheek, he trembled as he sank back into his seat. His poor heart was full of a passionate love that brought no joy with it ; yet he longed to clasp her to his breast and bear her away to some imaginary place where no laws could reach them, and no man touch or claim her.

Charlie, she saw, was sorely changed indeed. Great loss of blood and long suffering had blanched his complexion ; his eyes looked unnaturally large and bright ; his hands

seemed wasted, long, and shrivelled like those of an old man, and were white nearly as her own ; and, for a few seconds they regarded each other with a species of wistful agony.

She had no special dread of her husband meeting with Charlie, to whom he had so singularly erected the cenotaph ; but she felt, of course, that it were much better they should *not* meet. Then, for his part, Charlie knew not that Sir John Lennell had ever heard of his existence, or suspected the past relations that had existed between Lady Auriel and himself.

‘It was kind of you to come and see me. I had some fears of your coming at all,’ said Auriel, scarcely knowing what to say, and certainly Charlie seemed slow in taking the initiative ; ‘and you have been in London some days, Sidney told me.’

‘Four days.’

‘And have only now come to see——’

‘The only friend I have in it.’

She winced at the word, and said humbly :

‘And you are now—you are now——’

‘*En route* for Stirling ; to regain strength if I can, and if God wills it, go back to India, and the Highlanders again.’

‘Again ?’

‘And to return—no more.’

In her desperation she felt the necessity for telling him—though this alone led up to it—briefly and brokenly, how she knew not of his escape from drowning ; but in hinting at the pressure put upon her, she felt it was but a sickly attempt at palliation, and murmured something of earnest congratulation on his surviving two most unforeseen accidents, which had been, of course, table-talk for a time.

They were drifting to dangerous ground ; Charlie, pale as herself, was evidently, like her, too, using terrible self-control.

‘Oh, Auriel !’ he exclaimed, in a low voice, ‘I understand it all ; I can see the whole situation, which has left me, one of the few, perhaps, who in the ardour of a first and early

passion have surrendered up an entire life, as it were, to find it—to find it——'

'What?'

'A cruel, black, and bitter blank!'

'Oh, Charlie—if you quite knew all, you would not taunt me. 'See,' she added, with a ghastly smile, 'your ring has never left my finger since you placed it there!'

'What matter, when another's marriage hoop adjoins it?' he asked, more sadly than bitterly. 'How mysterious is this life of ours! So brief in term, and yet to many—to me—so full of suffering!'

'True, Charlie, you have lost me,' said she, simply, while her tears fell heavily.

'In that, I lose my past, and the present too.'

'But the world is all before you. You have your future.'

'A future without you, Auriel!'

She felt the full effect of the passionate words that trembled on his lips, for his voice was exquisitely sad and tender, and she felt that if ever a man's love was hers, Charlie's was so still.

'But for the pressure—the tyranny of which you speak,' said he, in a more agitated tone, as he drew near her, 'and if fate had not divided us, would you have been true to me, Auriel?'

'Charlie!' she exclaimed, with clasped hands, and eyes fixed on him earnestly through her hot tears, and a voice that was hoarse, dry, and weak, as with one after a long fever; 'love you I must, while life remains to me!'

There was silence for a few moments; neither had voice to say what rose in their hearts then, at the touch of each other's hands, at the tender gaze of each other's eyes, and the overwhelming sense of each other's presence.

To have such love as hers accorded to him still, and yet to be forced by destiny to live on as if that love existed not, was terrible; and to leave her for ever, as if she were nothing to him, was more terrible still!

He staggered up and felt the utter madness of remaining longer.

'Oh, Auriel, my darling, how shall I ever live without you? I go now, never to look upon your face again, and you will not refuse me one little request.'

'Charlie!'

'There was a time,' he said, in broken accents, 'there was a time when every kiss of yours was mine, Auriel, and I ask but *one* now, ere we part to meet no more.'

She bent her face towards him; for the last time his arms went madly round her, and for the last time his lips were pressed to hers in a long, clinging, and sorrowful kiss, and the next moment she was alone!

He was gone, and she sank, all but senseless, on a sofa.

'I doubt,' says a writer, truly, 'if the kiss of prosperous and plighted love is ever pressed so longingly, so closely, as the wild and hopeless caress that seals an eternal farewell for lips which never should have met, and parting now, must drink their bitter punishment, and never smile, except in mockery, again.'

When Sir John Lennell returned he found Auriel lying senseless on the sofa. She was in a fainting fit, from which she was recovered with extreme difficulty, and to the origin of which he might have had a clue, had he found Charlie's calling-card, but with the last effort of fading strength, she had wisely concealed it in the bosom of her dress.

* * * * *

It is Horace who tells us philosophically, among his poetry, that no power can rob us of the past. So the past, alas! was all that was left to Charlie now. Broken in health, disappointed in his tenderest hopes, and with life already a burden to him, ere it had attained its prime.

'Men have died and worms have eaten, but not for love,' says he who knew human nature so well; but whether, if hale and strong and full of his former hardihood, Charlie

would so morbidly have treasured the love he had lost, we must leave casuists to determine.

He never recovered his health or strength, but wasted and sank rapidly day by day ; and soon after, a brief newspaper paragraph informed Lady Auriel Lennell, and all who were interested therein, that he had 'succumbed to the severity of the injuries he had received in India,' and been found one morning dead, in his old room in the Castle of Stirling.

Younger soldiers, who knew him not, bore him to his last home ; Duncan Daljarroch was chief mourner, and a mourner in heart he was, while it seemed but yesterday that he heard the solemn wail of 'The Land o' the Leal'—the old Scottish death march—waking the echoes of the jelgoozeh grove on the slope of the Peiwar Khotal ; and there were a few veteran soldiers, who, with him, sorrowed for Charlie as they lowered him down, and the smoke of the farewell volley and the wail of the pipes went up together from the open grave.

And as Duncan Daljarroch slowly and reverently dropped upon Charlie's coffin a beautiful floral wreath of the rarest white flowers, he alone knew that it had come fresh from the hands of Auriel and with her tears upon its leaves.

THE END.



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